

ADVENT 2017 (ISAIAH)

Part 1: "God Breaks In"

Isaiah 6:1-8

Sunday, December 3, 2017

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"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. And I said: '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!' Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.' And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am! Send me'" (Isaiah 6:1–8, ESV).

This is God's word. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

"Almighty God, give us grace that we may cast away the works of darkness, and put upon us the armor of light, [in a time of year when we remember that your] Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he [will] come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the [living] and the dead, we may rise to [eternal] life; [we pray this] through [the name of] him who [lives] and [reigns] with [you the Father] and the Holy [Spirit], one God, now and for ever. Amen."¹

I. Introduction – The Advent series at Redeemer Christian Church

Today, as it is the fourth Sunday before Christmas, which marks the beginning of the season of Advent.

This year for Advent, we will be taking a brief survey of the words of Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet. *The book of Isaiah is about the hope of a coming savior.* It is a book that foretells the coming of Jesus Christ our Lord as a humble child in Bethlehem, but it is also a book that foretells a time that Jesus will return as a glorious King.

We will be taking the words of Isaiah and putting them in our own lives in this season of Advent. Now some of you might think that Advent is just a churchy word for the holiday season, but there is so

¹ The Episcopal Church, [*The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church*](#) (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated, 2007), 159.

much more to it than that. Advent is about hope. Advent is about anticipation. Advent is about purposefully taking account of the brokenness of the world and longing for the reality of the Kingdom of God in our lives. It is a time to remember that Christ has come, and it is a time to remember that he is coming again.

So in many ways, Advent couldn't be more opposite to what we typically associate with the "holiday season." For us to observe Advent is actually a healthy counter-culture to a materialist and consumerist reality of hurry, haste, distraction, and noise. Our culture's tendency towards distraction only accelerates as we approach Christmas. It is easy for Christmas to be just another day that comes and goes with little thought. But Christmas is not just another day. It is a "Holy Day." During the season of Advent, we will center our hearts and expectations on the beautiful truth that God became man so he could redeem his rebellious bride. Like ancient Israel, the original audience of Isaiah's message, we place our heart in a posture of yearning for the Messiah and his Kingdom to break into our lives. In fact, that's just what the word Advent means, "breaking in."

And today, from Isaiah 6, we will behold the God who breaks into our darkness and fear, so that the hope of his glory may shine.

II. The Context of Isaiah's Life and Ministry

We'll begin answering the question of "who is Isaiah?" Isaiah is a prophet, meaning he is chosen and commissioned by God to declare the very words of God to the people of Judah. Many of Isaiah's words are quite hard and unpopular words. Isaiah prophesies God's judgment against the kingdoms of Israel and Judah for their sin, injustice, and unfaithfulness. But, at the same time, he also prophesies words of hope. He prophesies, that though God's people have failed, God himself will save his people, and even redeem the nations. In fact, Isaiah's ultimate message is contained in his very name, which means, "*YHWH* is salvation!"

In terms of context, Isaiah is ministering at a time of national decline. The golden age of King David and King Solomon has long passed. The people of God are now divided into the two separate kingdoms of Judah in the South and Israel in the North. Recently, there has been a fairly prosperous king in Judah. His name was Uzziah. But Uzziah has recently suffered death and a humiliating end to reign due to his lack of regard for the holiness of God (which we will talk about a little later). And by the end of Uzziah's life and reign, dark clouds were gathering in the North.² The Empire of Assyria had just crowned a fierce new king who wanted to conquer the world. And the nations of Israel and Judah were on his warpath. The age of relative comfort and convenience and freedom were ending. Everyone sensed it. And a low current of fear and anxiety pulsed through the land.

To put in bluntly, Isaiah lives in an increasingly dark and urgent time.

And what happens in this moment? Light shines in the darkness! God breaks in! God shows something to Isaiah that is profound. Though God is holy and man is sinful, God has a plan for salvation.

² J. Alec Motyer, [*Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 20, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 79.

But you might ask, other than maybe satisfying some curiosity about Old Testament history, what do these words have to do with us? To that, I would say it is actually haunting how similar our situation is to ancient Judah and Israel. We live in a time when our nation is divided. We live in a time of economic turmoil. We live in a time when many of our political leaders often fail us. We live in a time when many people are going through religious motions, but in fact are very far from God. Isaiah's message couldn't be more relevant to us.

It is into this human reality that the message of Advent and the message of the prophet Isaiah breaks in upon us. This message reorients our perspective and astonishingly claims to give us real hope. And our passage shows us three truths of this Advent message: **1.) God is holier than we think, 2.) Sin is a bigger problem than we think, and 3.) Grace is better news than we think.**

III. The Text – Isaiah's Call

1. God is holier than we think.

We can barely imagine the magnitude of this experience. Isaiah is mourning the death the king and the state of his culture. He is worshipping in the Temple, praying to God, trying to make sense of his life and the life of his nation. Suddenly, something happens. His eyes are opened to see the fullness of reality. He no longer sees the man-made Temple, which is merely a type and shadow of God's true dwelling place (cf. Heb. 10:1). He sees reality unveiled – the very throne room of God in heaven (1).

And the God he sees is both terrifying and majestic. He is unlike anything Isaiah has ever seen. He is high and lifted up, meaning there simply nothing to compare him to in creation. The train God's royal robe fills the entire room.

Angelic beings named seraphim (“שֶׁרָפִיִּים”, literally meaning, “flames”) are burning with zeal, worship, and adoration for this great God (2). Even in their perfection, these beings humble themselves in the presence of this magnificent God by covering their faces and feet. They sing and shout to one another, “*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty. The whole earth is filled with his glory*” (3).

If the nature of God could be summed up in one word, that word would be “holy.” As one Old Testament scholar writes: **“God's holiness means that he is separate from everything that is sinful, utterly removed from the profane world, and glorious in majesty.”**³ The seraphim's three-fold repetition the word “holy” (“קִדּוּשׁ קִדּוּשׁ קִדּוּשׁ”) describes absolute purity, absolute perfection, and exponential power. This is the one moment in the entire Old Testament, where three Hebrew adjectives appear back to back. It is not one plus one plus one; it is infinite perfection times infinite perfection times infinite perfection.⁴ And when the name of this Most High God is spoken, heaven shakes and is filled with smoke (4). This God is the creator and sustainer of everyone and everything. He is eternal, infinite, and unchangeable in his power and perfection, his goodness and glory, wisdom, justice, and truth. He is the holy God!

³ Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1–39*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2007), 190.

⁴ Raymond C. Ortlund Jr. and R. Kent Hughes, *Isaiah: God Saves Sinners*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 77.

Isaiah's vision is one of ultimate reality as it really is. All distractions, all trinkets, all trifles, all toys, all cares completely disappear. In the presence of this God, there is simply no room to be concerned with personal significance. God, high and lifted up, outshines them all! The reality of God is so much glorious than we could ever imagine. The scripture claims that the whole earth is filled with his glory, but sadly our eyes are often blinded to this reality because they are focused on lesser things.

It is frighteningly easy to, like ancient Judah, go through the motions of worshipping God, but have no real relationship with him in our lives. We may not be confessing atheists who declare there is no God, but the Bible belt is full of functional atheists who live as if there was no God. What would life look like if we centered ourselves on the holiness of the Triune God instead? What would our lives look like if we believed with every fiber of our beings that this is true? What would it look like for you awareness of God to outshine your awareness of your circumstances?

And let me let in you in on a little secret. Your heart craves to actually know and be in communion with this glorious God. Our heart longs for something of more depth than consumption of material things. If all this existence is merely matter in motion, how hollow and hopeless of a life we have! But if we can know truly transcendent God standing independent from creation, that is good and glorious, then our lives have meaning. We have a purpose. We have a hope. God is holier than we think. But this creates a big problem. And that leads to point number two.

2. Sin is a bigger problem than we think.

Initially this glorious vision is not pleasant for Isaiah. In fact, he is ruined by this revelation of God (5). He pronounces the seemingly obvious judgment upon himself upon seeing the glory of God and the worship of the angels. In seeing this stark contrast between such perfection and himself, he confesses that he is dirty. His family is dirty. His nation is dirty. All times for games are over. He is fully aware that he has sinned against his holy Creator and he has no claim to the right to even walk away with his life! He doesn't attempt to make excuses or argue for extenuating circumstances. He doesn't say, "well, mistakes were made." He owns his failure. And he acknowledges and confesses that his sin is a fatal problem (Rom 6:23). He laments that he is "lost" ("גָּדַלְתִּי"). Other translations say, "Woe is me! For I am "undone" (KJV), ruined "NIV", "doomed" (The Message)."

But if we are going to be real honest with each other and ourselves, none of us look at our own sin this way. When it comes to ourselves, we always have extenuating circumstances. When it comes to our own sin, we all of the sudden become Jonny Cochran and find a way to justify ourselves and let ourselves off the hook. We tend to think we can make a plea bargain wherein we can be good enough people to atone for our wrongs. This is because all sin is rooted in the worship of self. It begins when we put ourselves in the place of God.

By the way, that is exactly what King Uzziah did. And for an interesting exercise, look up the story of King Uzziah (2 Kings 15:1-7; 2 Chron. 26). For the most part, he was actually a pretty nice guy. He was a successful king. He reigned for fifty-two years. But at the end of his life, he became arrogant and he felt invincible. He had no sober awareness of the holiness of God, and he put himself in the place of God. The reality of God became unreal to him.⁵ And he was judged.

⁵ Ibid., 76.

In many ways Uzziah was a symbol of the nation he led.⁶ And they were judged too.

In Amarillo, like Uzziah, we have a real nasty tendency to make light of our sins, because after all we are really nice people. We tend to think nothing can touch us and that we are invincible. And *in the nicest way possible, we put ourselves in the place of God*. But we are playing with deadly fire. Sin always terminates in long-term suffering and self-destruction.

Yet isn't it interesting that the pronounced judgment of sin on Isaiah doesn't even come from God? It is Isaiah who gives the judgment of "*woe is me*" upon himself. When Isaiah is confronted with the holiness of God, he knows the game is up. He knows he doesn't measure up and deserve to be in relationship with this God. In our bones we know the same is true for us, which is why we hurriedly try to distract ourselves. We sedate ourselves with entertainment, substance, and stuff, to drown out that our self-salvation projects have failed. We get caught up with careers are relational pursuits. Jesus had a phrase for this. He called it "*the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches,*" yet for many of us we could call it our lives (Mk. 4:19). The truth remains: sin is bigger problem than we think. We must own that fact. But thankfully, the story doesn't end there.

3. *Grace is better news than we think.*

God doesn't make Isaiah jump through hoops to prove himself. In fact, Isaiah doesn't even move. And angel flies and picks up burning coal that is upon the altar (6). He touches Isaiah's lips with this coal (7). And apparently whatever was burning on that altar was so potent, that it immediately gives Isaiah cleansing and courage. Thus, when God speaks and asks for whom will he send, Isaiah is able to hear and withstand his awesome voice (which is itself amazing) and say, "*Here am I! Send me*" (8). In a moment Isaiah is transformed by the grace of God from a self-condemning mourner into a confident missionary!

This is so sudden and unexpected, because grace is so counterintuitive to the way we think. In a broken world so filled with action and reaction, performance and reward, and failure and consequence, God breaks in with the power of his grace. But I want to press you even here: most of us don't really believe this is the way it works. We are caught up in trying to gut it out by our own effort. When we sin we impose self-imposed time-outs from God, or try to justify ourselves by judging others. We tear ourselves up with guilt, punishment, and pride, thinking we can earn our way to God. We try to bear our own cross because we don't think the grace of God is enough.

But it is enough. The grace that Isaiah receives is personal, powerful, and purposeful. It was *personal*, meaning it was meant specifically for Isaiah. It was *powerful*, meaning it worked immediately, completely, and without fail. And it was *purposeful*, meaning that Isaiah walked from this experience with a whole new meaning and mission for his life. Grace doesn't make us better people, it makes us new people and gives us purpose. He invites us to know him, and then he tasks us to make him known!

To quote Pastor Ray Ortlund: "*A guilty conscience, liberated by grace, unleashes us. The gospel says to us, 'That sin most damning to your conscience, that sin haunting your memory—Christ carried it far away to his cross, where it died under God's wrath. Justice has been satisfied. You are*

⁶ Motyer, 79.

released!"⁷

IV. The Savior – The Lamb Who Was Slain

But what can explain and account for this amazing grace? What could account for such a drastic change of events in light of the magnitude of God's holiness and the seriousness of sin? Because I will tell you what grace does not mean. Grace does not mean sin isn't real. Grace does mean sin doesn't matter. Grace does not mean, well everyone sins, so its no big deal. What grace does mean is that when confess and repent of our sin before God there is hope.

Isaiah's hope came from "the altar" from heaven – and, you know what, so does ours (6). For on this day and for all of time in eternity past and eternity future, there is an altar in heaven on which an atoning sacrifice has been made by the lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world (cf. Rev 13:8, NIV)– the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (Jn. 1:29).

The truth is none of us could ever atone for our own sin, but the good news is that God sent one who could. God sent forth his only Son to step down from his glorious throne room where he was worshipped, to come to this earth in humility, to empty himself, to climb onto a cross, and to make one perfect sacrifice upon the very altar of heaven. God sent forth Jesus to live the life we should have lived, to die the death we should have died, and to rise again to newness of life and the promise of return.

For all that would believe in him, he would give the right to become children of God! For all that would believe in him, he would take the perfect blood that flows from heaven's throne and apply it personally, powerfully, and purposefully to our lives, so that like Isaiah, we would be made new.

And the good news doesn't stop there! The blood that makes us new will soon mend all that is broken in our world; for the Messiah that once came will soon come again! This is the amazing hope of Advent!

V. Conclusion & Prayer

So Redeemer Christian Church, my charge to you is to let this Advent season not be a season centered on holiday parties and the getting of stuff. Let us instead focus our hearts on the hope of this salvation. My prayer for us all is that we would be a people changed by the hope of this amazing grace. May we be a people who allow King Jesus to break into our lives in a new and astonishing way!

AMEN.

Community Group Questions

- 1) *Isaiah 6 is a chapter filled with a vision of God's glory and holiness. In this Advent season, what are some spiritual disciplines you can incorporate into your life to increase your awareness of the holiness of God? What are ways you plan to drown out the noise of the world and center your heart on God?*

⁷Ortlund 80.

- 2) *Isaiah lived at a time of political, economic, and religious decline. It was into this broken context, Isaiah's vision of God shone. What are the areas of brokenness in your life that you need to invite God into this season?*
- 3) *How can you make this season a time of stirring your anticipation for Jesus and celebrating his amazing grace?*