

[and its people] to integrity, to endurance, to trust in God despite an unfavorable response. The passage calls the church to faithfulness, not measurable success. Trust in the powerful deity.”<sup>3</sup> We may not have seen the power of God like Isaiah did. But like him, we are still called to proclaim God’s message in spite of things. God still needs us to speak and live the grace that pours forth from God’s goodness. It matters that we declare the good news, whether anyone is listening or not.

The end of the chapter references a stump. Like the stump of an oak tree, that remains in the ground after it is felled. “The holy seed is its stump.” Do you remember that famous picture book, *The Giving Tree*? It’s about a boy who is friends with a tree. He keeps coming, year after year to visit her, the tree. And she gives him all kinds of gifts: shade, apples, wood, and so on. Until he finally comes back as an old man, and there is nothing left but a stump. The boy is now old and he needs a place to rest. So he sits down on the stump to take a load off; and he is happy.

My feelings about that book are pretty much the same as my feelings about the ending of this passage in Isaiah: I don’t *like* either of them. On the surface, they’re depressing. But I also think Isaiah’s image of the stump and the one in the Giving Tree are telling us something else, too. They both seem like an endpoint: the end of the tree’s life, what’s left of God’s people after the exile. But by grace, those things are not the end. The tree stump still provided rest, grace, a gift for the boy, even though his own choices had led to the tree’s demise. The stump in Isaiah points toward a sliver of hope; toward the promises of God that can never be extinguished, no matter how bleak things seem. Maybe that stump is the hope of God’s good news that keeps being spoken out into the world, whether or not anyone is listening. Maybe that stump is the hope embodied in the remnant of faithful people; people whose spirits are down, but into whom the Holy Spirit herself is always breathing new life.

When we sign up to serve God, when we say ‘yes, I will follow Jesus,’ then we agree to serve a God who is bigger than us, different than us, more gracious than us, and who understands the world far better than we ever can. And we agree to serve God even when our work may feel a bit futile. Even when crucifixion looms. Even when we see stumps all around. But with God, stumps are not only endings. They can be, by the grace of God, also surprising signs of hope.

And a big piece of that hope is that God is wholly other. That God is transcendent. So even when things go upside down or go nowhere at all, God is still God. God is mystery, awe, wonder, glory, power, love, majesty. God remains holy, holy, holy.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to that God, our God. Amen.

- 1 Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 426-427.
- 2 Mark Labberton, *The Dangerous Act of Worship: Living God’s Call to Justice* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2007), 63.
- 3 Charles L. Aaron, Jr, “Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13],” Working Preacher, February 6, 2022, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revISED-common-lectionary/fifth-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-isaiah-61-8-9-13-3>



First Presbyterian Church  
of Royal Oak

November 17, 2024  
Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost  
“*Serving a Majestic God*”  
Rev. Emma Nickel  
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-8

Do you remember when those immersive art shows were all the rage a couple of years ago? The one featuring Vincent Van Gogh’s paintings has been especially popular. Rather than a regular art gallery where there’s a few paintings on big, white walls, in these immersive experiences the paintings actually become the walls surrounding you. Van Gogh’s vibrant sunflowers are projected floor to ceiling across from the undulating skies of his starry night. The paintings move in choreographed time to the soaring, ethereal soundtrack. It is all so present to your senses, you might feel like you want to sit down at a table at Van Gogh’s famous cafe terrace, or paw your way through his thick bed of purple irises. Many of these shows offer a virtual reality experience, too, to raise the level at which you feel like you are not looking at paintings, but you are actually walking around inside them, reaching out to touch the wonders they display.

This is something like how I imagine Isaiah’s experience in the divine throne room. His emotions must have been soaring as he reached out to touch the velvety hem of the Lord’s robe, as it unfurled and filled the entire space with its bounty. The divine creatures must have seemed real and yet otherworldly, as Isaiah wondered at their wings and their faces. Light and shadow tricked his eyes, and smoke filled his nostrils. Isaiah’s senses must have been on overload as he was taken up into this swirling, majestic and mystical sight. Not only was his heart filled with wonder, he also felt a bit of fear.

His absolute amazement about God’s holiness put into perspective his own, lowly humanity. He was made good in the divine image, yes. But was he himself *holy* like God? Definitely not. The sight and sounds made him realize he was a sinner, a meager human being, a regular person marked by the brokenness of the world. “Woe is me!” Isaiah said. He acknowledged that *his* words did not always speak love and gratitude. He and the people around him were limited as human creatures. And in the shadows of the throne room, that fact was thrown into sharpest image.

The wonder of the scene continued with a live coal being touched to Isaiah’s lips. This action is unique in scripture; we don’t see it happen anywhere else. But the idea of purification by fire is one we’re familiar with. This painful, hot coal had to be lifted with a pair of tongs, even by the seraph who brought it to Isaiah’s mouth

to cleanse and purify him. By the touch of the coal, Isaiah was transformed. He was still human. But now he was prepared to be a prophet in the service of this majestic Lord. Unlike Jonah and like so many other reluctant prophets throughout our scriptures, Isaiah said yes to God's call: "Here I am, send me."

The wonders this passage describes are mystical; they're hard for me to wrap my mind around. But that doesn't make them less important. This passage pushes me to understand a particular quality of God called transcendence. It comes from the Latin meaning "stepping over" or "going beyond." As Daniel Migliore writes, "transcendence is God's mode of being 'beyond' or 'above' the world. God's being and power surpass the world and are never identical with, confined to, or exhausted in the world God has freely created and to which God freely relates."<sup>1</sup> Some scholars, including Karl Barth, talk about transcendence by reminding us that God is "wholly other." This is not the only quality of God, though. There is also God's immanence. Immanence means God's nearness to and intimacy with all creatures. That's not the opposite of transcendence, though. We understand both of these qualities as innate characteristics of our Triune God.

But this passage is all about transcendence. It was the transcendence of God that inspired Isaiah, that allowed him to endure the purification, and that brought him to his clear answer, "yes," when God called. Some of us may be searching for God's transcendence. Especially when we cannot understand what is happening in the world, I think many of us would love to feel a glimpse of what Isaiah did—to be just absolutely blown away by the presence, power, and glory of God. We want to know and experience divinity. Life on earth tends to be so filled with the every day that it can be hard to feel God's majesty. Sometimes we long to be gripped by that incredible sense of awe.

We should want that. We should absolutely long to have some sense of God's enormity and power. But that majesty will not leave us the same. Like Isaiah, we cannot glimpse that power of God and just continue on like we are. As Presbyterian pastor and preaching professor Mark Labberton writes, "Nothing is as dangerous as encountering the true and living God. Why? Because meeting God redefines everything we call normal and commands us to seek first [God's] kingdom."<sup>2</sup> Encountering the power of God should rearrange all the furniture in our minds and hearts; it should make us question the values of security and comfort and safety we hold dear; it should call us to serve and love in ways that make no sense to the world around us.

Either Isaiah understood all this perfectly, and he daringly agreed to play on the team of the transcendent, mighty God he had just met. Or, Isaiah had no clue what he had just agreed to. Because what God was asking of him did not seem to make any sense, in his world or in ours. King Uzziah had just died. During his long reign, Uzziah had been a stabilizing influence. Now, things were up in the air; there was political uncertainty and worry. God called the prophet Isaiah into the thick of all that. But not to speak peace or comfort. Rather, to speak words no one would understand. We have to read the next verses in Isaiah chapter 6 to see what happened. I don't want to read them, because they are unsettling and

confusing. But if we skip them, then we don't really know what we're saying when we say, "here I am, Lord." So Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 9 through 13:

And [the Lord] said [to Isaiah], 'Go and say to this people:

"Keep listening, but do not comprehend;  
keep looking, but do not understand."

10 Make the mind of this people dull,

and stop their ears,

and shut their eyes,

so that they may not look with their eyes,

and listen with their ears,

and comprehend with their minds,

and turn and be healed.'

11 Then Isaiah said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said:

'Until cities lie waste

without inhabitant,

and houses without people,

and the land is utterly desolate;

12 until the LORD sends everyone far away,

and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

13 Even if a tenth part remains in it,

it will be burned again,

like a terebinth or an oak

whose stump remains standing

when it is felled.'

The holy seed is its stump."

It was a heavy, burdensome task to which God called Isaiah. What God described pointed to the Exile, to the time when, at God's direction, the people would be taken away, out of their homes to live in foreign lands. When invaders would tear down their cities. When they had no idea when they would return home or what they would have to return to. Isaiah was to speak God's word to them, even though they were not going to understand it. Even though, for a long time, they were not going to turn and serve God once again. After such an emotional, heightened experience of God's presence, this task must have felt like a blow to Isaiah. He wanted to serve God, he was prepared to minister on behalf of this holy Lord, and this was what he was going to have to do?! This was what he was going to be living through?

It seems pretty terrible. And yet, God invited a prophet to serve the people. God still asked that they hear directly from the Lord, even in the midst of a terrible time. As Charles Aaron, Jr, writes, "God tells the prophet to proclaim the message despite the unwillingness of the people to hear it. Isaiah proclaims the message, even in spite of apathy and opposition. This understanding of ministry may not provide a stirring rallying cry. Nevertheless, the passage calls the church