

May 30, 2021

**“Touch My Lips”
Sermon by Rev. Susan Drake**

Isaiah 6:1-8

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!”

Sermon “Touch My Lips”

This strange but magnificent story in Isaiah is set in the eighth century BCE, after the death of King Uzziah who ruled for 50 years. Isaiah, whose name means “God is our salvation,” spends the first five chapters complaining about God’s people... they drink too much, they are bent on war, they don’t care anything about others, they are full of greed, the women are loose, they worship idols, their leaders are corrupt and so on. Now, to make matters worse, they are completely destabilized after the unexpected death of their King.

In the midst of all that, Isaiah has a weird dream that places him in the temple of God. Now if you have ever wondered where we got the image of a giant, male God sitting on a throne, this is certainly one of those places.

This is a vivid dream where Isaiah can feel the temple shake, and hear the angels sing, can smell the smoke of the incense and see the fiery angels and the hem of God’s robe, just the hem now because God is a giant in this story.

What you need to know is that Isaiah thinks he is going to die because according to the story, King Uzziah was just struck with leprosy and died for doing that very thing, entering the temple. So Isaiah is terrified.

I say this to speak to Isaiah's state of mind when he encounters God. He is convinced he is about to die and he knows that God is angry about the sins of the people.

But in this dream Isaiah doesn't run away in fear, rather he is struck by the knowledge of his own unworthiness to stand before God.

And in opposition of Isaiah's expectation to die, a Seraph takes a coal from the fire and touches Isaiah's lips with it and says "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Fire was seen as a purifying agent because fire was used to purify precious metal. So this gesture is seen as a way to purify Isaiah to his readers. So even though he thinks himself unworthy, God has a different plan in mind, God forgives his sin, removes his guilt and calls him into service. But the story doesn't end there.

God is still angry and tells Isaiah to go and confuse and confound the people with his words so he can destroy humanity and start all over again. God eventually settles down and uses Isaiah to speak truth to power.

Now it is thought that Isaiah was educated and from an aristocratic and privileged family and that he spent most of his life in Jerusalem with access to the royal court of four successive Kings.

But even though he had a prominent position in the society and was a man of means he was very attuned to the struggles of the poor and the excesses of the wealthy. He spoke truth to power about what God's justice looked like.

He used his status and standing to try and make sure that the poor were fed and that the oppressed went free. He tried to prevent war and inspire peace and he continually tried to bring the kings and the culture back to the worship of God, not wealth and power.

So this story was written some 2800 years ago... but we are still in need of prophets aren't we? Even those who confound us with things beyond our understanding. I am always confounded before I come to accept a thing. There is always confusion as we piece together truth.

Our work is that when that confusion comes that we don't put up walls of denial, or get angry instead of listening, or run away in panic from our fear of change, but that we stay put and wait for the blessing to come.

For we are worthy of the blessing, we are worthy of the call, we are worthy to raise our hands and say "Here I am Lord, send me".

I remember the first time I served communion. It was my first year in Seminary and I was serving as a student pastor in a large church in Belleville, Ill. The senior pastor, Pastor Ann, had asked me to assist her with communion.

I was sitting there with her and the other clergy on the staff moments before we were to serve and I was overwhelmed with a sense of unworthiness.

Steeped in the residual shame my culture had put on me for being different, and steeped in the shame of all my bad choices, I did not feel I was good enough to get up there and be a part of such a sacred moment. I started shaking and tears welled up in my eyes and I wanted to run.

Ann looked at me and asked if I was okay. I asked in a small, pain-filled whisper, “am I worthy?” She squeezed my hand as we stood and said “none of us are, and all of us are”.

None of us are when we are just being human, but all of us are when we let God have our lives, when we surrender our spirit to the divine, when we let God work through us like Isaiah did in this story.

We don't know where and when God will ask us to use our words on behalf of Justice. Like Isaiah, we don't know what truth God will ask us to speak to power. But let us all be willing to say “Send Me”!

We must be willing to confound those around us with the truth. I bet you know the look right? You are having coffee with friends and you bring up that your church is open and affirming and somebody looks at you with that confused look on their face. “What do you mean that your church affirms the gays”? Right? Or what do you mean that you let everyone take communion? What do you mean when you believe in equality for all?

Like in Isaiah's time there is still so much to say about how people are treated, how the poor are treated, how the outcasts of our society are treated, about how many lives are taken by people in power causing wars whose front lines they will never see.

There is still so much work to be done. I'm not saying you need to join the peace corps or join me at a protest, or run for office-- but just look for those conversations. Be ready and willing to share what you believe, look for those moments when you can use your words to affect change, or send an email. Look for those moments when, like Isaiah, you can use your privilege to speak up on behalf of someone without it.

Don't let your guilt or shame stand in your way. God has already forgiven every mistake you have ever made. Feel that worthiness that can only come from God. Let God have your mouth, your mind, your feet, your hands, and your heart and say out loud. “Here I am, send me”.

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