

The Rev. Dr. Eric O. Springsted
Georgetown Presbyterian Church, Washington, DC
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In the Meantime...

Text: Isaiah 6:1-13

The record of the prophet Isaiah's call through a vision he had in the inner sanctum of the Temple in the year 740 BC is one of the most striking passages in Scripture. In the smoke and the thunder and the vision of the seraphim about the throne of the Lord, it contains all the sense of the *mysterium* and *tremendum*, the mystery and the awesomeness, that one scholar once claimed are the marks of the Holy. It is also a memorable passage that has had long effect in both Judaism and Christianity; our hymns ancient and modern that sing "Holy, holy, holy..." come from the singing of the seraphim that Isaiah heard. However, it is not the mystery and awe and the sense of the most Holy that I want us to think about this morning. Rather, the passage in its literal, historical sense has a sort of timeliness for us here today that we need to think about first.

This is the history. The vision takes place in the year 740 BC, the year good King Uzziah passed away and the year that his son Ahaz ascended the throne. It was therefore a year fraught with anxiety, for in the ancient world the succession of kings was nothing like the succession of presidents in America, where, pretty much no matter who is president, the republic will go on, despite what the losers in any given election may think. Because of frequent elections dominated by the will of the people, policies do not tend to swing wildly for us. In ancient Judah, however, the entire fate of the nation was bound up with a single man, the king, and with his abilities – moral, spiritual, political and military. It was so bound throughout the length of his reign, short or long. Thus as good King Uzziah passed away and his son Ahaz ascended the throne, the Judaeans had every reason to wonder anxiously about their future. Would peace, prosperity and

security continue? Or would Ahaz by the same sort of moral arrogance and political conniving and despotism that plagued the greater number of ancient Near Eastern nations cause Judah to be crushed between the gathering anvils of thunder clouds on the horizon, between cruel Assyria and the Western alliance of states that sought to rebel from Assyria? If he were a bad king like this, surely the people would also have been anxious about the possibility that he might reign a long time, for in that case he could do a very lot of damage.

Where this passage has some direct relevance to us here in this church is that this church, like Judaea is in a time of transition in its leadership. A pastor has left, a new one needs to be chosen. To that end, there is a Pastoral Nominating Committee assiduously looking high and low for a pastor who will lead this church for some years to come. Even though our system provides for interim ministers – and has even devised a lingo that calls us “transitional specialists” — so that transitions in leadership may go smoothly, there is still a fair amount of anxiety in a time of transition. These deep questions have to be asked: Will we find somebody who is capable of leading this congregation with intelligence and good grace and who will be a partner with the ordained lay leadership? What new things will he or she bring? What new things will he or she make you do? Will there be vision or mind numbing complacency? Can he or she handle conflict? Can he or she raise a budget? Will he or she love us? Can we love back?

There are other parallels as well. Just as the prophet Isaiah in a time of anxiety was called to preach to a people who hear but do not understand, who see and do not perceive, so too any church in a time of transition has to worry whether a good minister will actually be heard and appreciated. Presbyterian churches work by a partnership; crises in leadership can seriously threaten the well being of the church, but so can crises in followership. Sometimes leaders can make up for fallow times in congregational response; sometimes a congregation can make up for

deficiencies in pastoral leadership. But in the end everybody has to listen and play a role. So in a time of transition, one has to be anxious about whether everybody will see and hear. It is not a given; they didn't after all in ancient Judaea. Just as important, too, is that the church always has to worry about itself bearing witness effectively in a world that would prefer to look the other way, or that would prefer to turn the gospel that transforms lives into something so toothless that it merely confirms people in their comfortable habits, habits that they never want challenged.

These parallels between Isaiah's situation and yours allow for drawing out some deeper truths from this passage that tell us about human beings in times of change, truths which any church would do well to pay heed. There are three such truths.

The first truth is that there are hierarchies in our lives and that what happens on the top has great effect on the bottom. While ministers are not kings, what they do, nevertheless, affects in all sorts of ways those who work with them, and affects the institutions they direct. In the Presbyterian Church we are rightly proud of our lay participation, and unlike churches which depend heavily on a minister's or priest's direction, we can function very well through our lay leadership. Still, over the long term that is not a substitute for pastoral leadership, and good or bad pastoral leadership does make a very big difference in what goes on in the church. It can and ought to make a difference in helping to strengthen the lay leadership.

The second truth is anxious people don't hear very well. The people of Isaiah's time heard but didn't understand, saw but didn't perceive. Anxiety does this to a people, and anxious people rarely judge accurately or perceptively, for either their worry makes them pessimistic, or, to compensate, they become recklessly optimistic, and start to believe that things will turn out a certain way simply because they would like them to turn out that way. In either case, people just don't hear or see accurately when they are anxious. They can't see where the real hope is, and at

the same time they blind themselves to real dangers because of false hopes.

The third great truth that this passage teaches us, though, is that neither of the first two truths is ultimate. In the end neither determines our direction or our fate. To see why consider carefully what the content of Isaiah's vision in the temple is in this hour fraught with anxiety. King Uzziah is dead; nobody knows how King Ahaz will turn out. But in Isaiah's vision is it either Uzziah or Ahaz that is on the throne of Judah? It is neither; rather it is the Lord himself. But not only is the message of this vision that it is the Lord who is the real king, all the company of heaven assure the visionary that this one occupying the throne is three times holy. The holiness of neither Uzziah nor of Ahaz can the people be sure of, and hence they can never be sure of the future that they might bring. But they can be sure, Isaiah tells them, that the Lord is both the one who brings the future because he is the real king, and that, therefore, since he is holy, he will bring a holy future.

But, of course, that is precisely the message that the people of Judah cannot hear above the noise of their anxiety. They cannot believe that they are not, or at least their king is not in charge of their destiny. To their minds they believe, therefore, that they must do everything *but* remain calm in the coming years. As a result, because they and Ahaz both play it this way, they have good reason to be anxious. For when the time comes to make a life saving decision, and it comes soon enough in Ahaz's reign, Ahaz himself cannot hear Isaiah's advice to him to simply forget about the threatening forces on the horizon. For Isaiah tells him that it is not the armies that threaten Judah who determine history, the Lord alone does so. So, Isaiah counsels Ahaz, simply rest and trust. He says simply, "believe and you will be established, trust and you will understand." Yet, Ahaz, like most every political leader before him and after him, anxious because he thinks the future is in his hands, does not take that advice and nearly destroys the

country. Would that we would learn after so many years!

In this and the coming years this church – and the church as a whole – faces many changes, changes about which one can be anxious, one way or another. There will be major changes in leadership, and while everybody hopes for the best, not everybody is always agreed on what the best might even mean. Some want stability, and believe that the less change the better, or they think that the change we need is to turn the clock back twenty or even fifty years. Others want a whole lot more change in the other direction. For still others, well, we haven't seen them in awhile as they are neither leaders nor followers, but are laying low and reserving judgement until they see what the changes may be.

The denomination and the church as a whole are also anxious. For years we have been battling over the question of ordination standards, and have spent so much energy on the battle that we have no visible and effective mission policy. We along with other main line churches have seen a steady decline in membership, and we worry that we will cease being even relevant. The nation, too, is anxious. We remain hovering on the edge of a recession, unemployment is high, and the level of political discourse is pathetically low. There are ideologues all around us, and few have any vision of the common good, other than to assume that what is good in their own eyes should be good enough for everybody. We remain mired in two wars.

We are undoubtedly anxious about all of these things. We worry about what we are to do, either to make things turn out as we think they should, or to steadfastly resist erosion of what is precious to us. Now, if Isaiah has anything at all to say to us in this situation it is simply that we ought not to be anxious at all. For he tells us, it is not we, nor is it our enemies, who are really in charge of any of these changes. Nor is it the ones who often seem to be in charge. It is not President Obama, nor the forty-first or the sixtieth vote in the Senate, nor Osama bin Laden nor

the *Presbyterian Layman* nor the General Assembly. What the prophet has to tell us is that there is someone else on the throne and that there is something deeper and more profound at work in our lives than we can see or hear or understand. It is that something that determines our future.

The church needs to know this. It has always had reasons to be anxious about transitions. But if the church, if this church, takes a broader and longer view of its own history it cannot help but also see that the anxiety should never be overwhelming. Transition and changes have happened; good people have always left positions and everybody wondered how they could be replaced. But each and every time, people of faith and ability have been found to continue on. “Found” though is not the right word, though. “Sent” is much more to the point. For “found” makes it sound accidental; “sent” indicates who really is on the throne. For just as in a time of anxiety Isaiah was sent to a people who were anxious, and who often could not hear or see because of that anxiety, so, too, the one on the throne who establishes and cares for his people will send those leaders that they need.

God will send somebody, and sometimes who God sends is rather surprising. When, as described in our gospel lesson, Jesus chose those he would send, he chose ignorant fishermen. Yet, as Luke later tells it, those men and women “turned the world upside down.” We are here because of those God has sent, and we will continue because God sends people. A number of the ones God has sent, are in fact sitting in the pews and are here every Sunday. One can be confident that God will send men and women. But that does not mean that one is to lay low until such time as he does. As Dante put it, “he who sees the need, but awaits the call has set his spirit to refuse it.” An important part of recognizing that God does send those whom we need is also recognizing, as Isaiah had to do, that God also sends you. Three weeks ago you sang the hymn “Here I am Lord.” The text is taken from this passage about Isaiah’s call and it is appropriately

used at ordinations – ordinations of ministers, but also of deacons and elders who are also called. But it is appropriately sung by everybody in the congregation, for as Presbyterians we do believe that there is a priesthood of all believers; faith means that we are all called to some task or function within Christ's body.

Let me tell you a little secret. Churches may well be anxious about their leadership, and sometimes whether they will ever find anybody at all. But from a minister's side, at least any good minister's side, the things that congregations worry most about in securing a minister are often the least important things of all to us. For just as ministers themselves have a call, and must recognize who is on the throne doing the calling, they are most attracted to congregations where the people individually and collectively feel a strong sense of call. To attract an attractive minister, you have to be attractive yourself, and what being attractive above all means is that this is a place where you do ask in all seriousness, "Is it I, Lord?" and where in all humility you have all accepted that it is you. If you do accept it, and if you let yourself be sent, you can be sure that God will send to you exactly what you need.