

1. Isaiah 6 – When Y Died, I Saw X

When President Kennedy died, I saw a death of hope in myself and our nation.

When Martin Luther King died, I saw the cost of insisting on justice.

When Robert Kennedy died, I saw that the best of us get killed by the worst of us.

When planes crashed into New York City towers, I saw the vulnerability of my nation.

When King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw God.

King Uzziah was a relatively good king, one that Isaiah apparently trusted to bring better conditions into being. We don't know exactly what Isaiah expected to happen or what he was saying to others before he "saw God," but apparently Uzziah's death by a cruel disease was not what he hoped for. Also, the utterances of Isaiah's mouth were apparently called into question.

Isaiah says that he saw God, which is a rather startling statement. The God of the Bible is typically described as the "Unseen." Late in the first century of the Common Era, the Gospel of John states that "No human being has seen God." So what did Isaiah see?

In Isaiah 6 where Isaiah describes his vision of God, he admits that God was not literally seen. Isaiah's vision was about a figure imagined to be on a throne, but hidden by the flapping wings of six-winged figures.

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the skirt of his robe filled the temple. About him were attendant seraphim, and each had six wings; one pair covered his face and one pair his feet, and one pair spread in flight.

This Divine King whose train filled the temple was not actually seen; only these six-winged angel messengers were seen and they were dream images as well this image of a Divine King. In this trance that Isaiah was having in the temple, these super-angels were "calling ceaselessly to one another,"

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts
the whole Earth is full of his glory.

Typical Christian churchgoers in the 21st Century tend to sentimentalize the words "holy" and "glory." In his book *The Idea of the Holy*, Rudolf Otto defines "holy" as an experience of a "tremendous mysteriousness" that produces dread and fascination and requires courage to sustain. "Awe" is another word for this experience. So I can imagine that the cry of these angels had a rather harsh tone like the caw of crows.

AWE, AWE, AWE
the whole Earth is filled with this cawing.

This seems to be pretty close to how Isaiah says he experienced it:

And as each one called, the threshold shook to its foundations, while the house was filled with smoke. Then I cried,

Woe is me! I am lost,
for I am a man of unclean lips
and I dwell among a people of unclean lips;
yet with these eyes I have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.

Isaiah is talking about a "tremendous mysteriousness" that is undoing his entire religion, convicting him of lying and of dwelling among liars who do not speak the

truth. Isaiah's "unclean lips" does not mean jam on them or four-letter words coming out of them. Isaiah is a preacher and his words are false. His lips are dirty because of the words he speaks, the lies he tells among a people who are also lying.

We need to unpack some of the other symbols Isaiah uses. The house that was filled with smoke was Isaiah's temple of worship. Whatever had gone on there had become cloudy. And the threshold that shook to its foundations was that same temple, that same worship that Isaiah and his nation practiced. Isaiah's religion was shaken by the death of Uzziah and by an audit of the religious inadequacies Isaiah practiced.

Interiorly, Isaiah felt his whole sense of self undone, yet he saw himself staring at WHAT rules the cosmos. "King" is a symbol here for being ruled, not a description of Final Reality. The Final Reality Isaiah sees is not seen by the descriptive mind. It is seen by the image-making soul of Isaiah. In this Biblical text, God is a "tremendous mysteriousness" mediated to us by experiences of Awe flapping between us and the Final Majesty. All this is a kind of poetry, a kind of trance, a kind of dream.

"LORD of Hosts" might be translated as "YAHWEH, the GREAT I AM THAT I AM, the Source of all angels – all experiences of Awe." And "YAHWEH" is a historically rich term that reaches back in Isaiah's memory to the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and to the adventures in Awe-filled living of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

So, Isaiah sees something, something important, however cryptic it may seem to be in the way Isaiah tells about it. Isaiah's story continues:

Then one of the seraphim flew to me carrying in his hand a glowing coal which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said,

See, this has touched your lips;
your iniquity is removed,
and your sin is wiped away.

This forgiveness or fresh start for Isaiah is pictured as a hot experience. Lying lips are seared, burned clean with a hot truth that has been suppressed by Isaiah's frequently spoken delusions. What a wonderful teaching about forgiveness this is: forgiveness is not an indulgence of our falseness, but a welcome home to our reality. Being forgiven by The Final Reality means the burning of our false approaches to living and an opening to that mode of living that we were made for.

Now, I imagine that Isaiah is more or less stunned, but with eyes and ears open to see and hear something fresh about the way life is. And what Isaiah says he hears is YAHWEH discussing something with his angels as if Isaiah were not even there.

Then I heard the LORD saying, Whom shall we send? Who will go for us?

I imagine there was a bit of pause in the drama at this point, before Isaiah points out that he is listening and that he is ready to be the one who is sent.

And I answered, Here am I; send me.

Then the King, the LORD of Hosts says, "GO and tell this people THE TRUTH."

The Divine voice explains further that the people are not going to listen. So Isaiah asks "How long do I have to endure saying what no one hears?" And the substance of the answer he got was this: "As long as it takes."

I imagine that some of this conversation that Isaiah poeticizes was seen in retrospect rather than on the day that Isaiah begins his unpopular ministry. Whatever it was that Isaiah was lying about and however difficult it was for his listeners to quit lying, we who find ourselves awake today to some aspect of what is true can identify with Isaiah's experience that the teller of truth has an uphill climb in a culture that treasures its delusions.

Perhaps a contemporary example would help. Today most people are lying about

the notion that economic growth can resolve all our problems of unemployment, underemployment, government debt, lack of money for infrastructure and for many areas of our social life that need restructuring. The truth is that economic growth on this finite planet has reached a limit beyond which matters become worse not better. Overall, indiscriminate growth will have to cease. We will need less people, not more; less energy use, not more; less waste, not more; less ecological damage, not more. We face the unprecedented challenge of creating justice for everyone with far less overall material input. In general, people are lying about this. Those who tell the truth are not heard. This was Isaiah's experience about the truth of international affairs as they impacted his tiny nation.

The key theological point of this famous confession of Isaiah is that the call to tell the "inconvenient truth" is always a tremendous shaking of the foundations of our ethics and our religion. Facing an overwhelmingly significant truth that we have been unwilling to face is a "Divine" experience, an experience of Awe, an awakening and a call from Awesome (Holy) Reality. The flapping Awe messengers screech in our ears, smoke rises, guilt appears, forgiveness is offered, choice to live more realistically yawns before us. "Here am I, send me" is the happy response whatever it costs. Retreating into unreality is a journey into the hell of despair no matter what comforts it seems to offer. Reality that is truly the Reality of Almighty Holiness is unrelenting. No one escapes the pressure of Truth on our lying lives. The pressure of Truth upon our constructions of unreality is an experience of the Divine as exposed in Isaiah's most personal witness and in the biblical heritage as a whole.