

Astonishment  
Isaiah 6:1-13  
Feb. 9, 2025

## INTRODUCTION

As many of you know, we have a grandbaby named Elizabeth who was born in July. This is one of the great rewards for having survived the challenges of raising your own children. One of the things I love most about babies is the wide range of expressions they have as they are learning new things. I especially like the look of **astonishment** that babies so often have because the world is so new. You know the look. Eyes as wide as they can be. Mouth in a wide oval. Often there is an audible gasp. And then their head jerks back just a bit. They don't know if they are scared and should start crying or if they are excited and should start laughing.

Often this look of astonishment comes at that moment when a baby has done something new, like pulling themselves up standing. They are astonished that they've managed to change the world. They have a new sense of power over their surroundings. But other times the look comes when they are surprised by something another person does. That is the whole fun of playing peek-a-boo. Surprise, joy, excitement, and yes, even a bit of fear are all wrapped up in that one delightful expression. When something new is revealed to us, the natural response is to be astonished.

As we get older, it gets harder and harder to be astonished by anything. It also gets less and less socially acceptable to let people know you are astonished. I'm always bemused by teen-agers who are going through one of the most amazing periods of their lives. While their bodies are being transformed, when they are making life-changing decisions, and learning new and wonderful things, they pretend to be bored.

I look at old photos of me and sometimes I look like this world-weary veteran who wandered into Rick's bar in Casablanca or a French philosopher suffering from ennui mixed with existential angst. Because, let's face it, astonishment is uncool. Thankfully, I grew out of that need to appear cool and can now openly embrace the joy of surprise, especially when I encounter something new and beautiful. But the older we get the less there is that astonishes.

## SCRIPTURES

This came to mind this week because all three of our biblical passages assigned for today involve people being astonished by God. Isaiah, the Apostle Paul, and Jesus' disciples all had experiences that rocked their world and left them changed. The three experiences share common features. They each took place while people were doing a normal, routine task. Isaiah was working in the Temple as a priest. Paul was on his way to Damascus. And the disciples were fishing. But in the midst of the ordinary, the extraordinary happened. All of them were frightened by their experience and felt unworthy. All of them received a revelation or new insight: Isaiah saw God in heaven; Paul saw the resurrected Christ, and the disciples saw that Jesus was more than a mere man. And each of them was given a task. If we had time this morning, I'd love to go into each of these texts in detail, but I'll save two of them for the future and focus today on Isaiah's vision in the Temple when he saw the LORD, Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

## THE YEAR KING UZZIAH DIED

There is something beautiful about the simple way the Isaiah text begins: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne." It may sound like Isaiah is trying to give us a precise date for this vision – that it happened in such and such a year, but, unfortunately, we don't know for sure when King Uzziah died. It was sometime around 742-736 B.C., but ancient chronology is not a precise science. We also don't know how long it was before Isaiah wrote down his experience.

What we do know is that Isaiah had his experience when the mighty Assyrian Emperor Tiglath-Pileser III was at the height of his power. We know a lot about him because Assyria was at that time the superpower in the Middle East and the empire left a lot of records. There are many texts telling us about exploits of Tiglath-Pileser. By the way, I had a friend in seminary who got a cat while we were studying the Old Testament. He named the cat Tig, which was short for Tiglath-Pileser III. Yes, we were that nerdy in seminary.

The reason Isaiah told us that his vision came in the year that King Uzziah died is that Uzziah reigned for over a half a century in Jerusalem. His death was a turning point in Jewish history. The Old Testament counts him as one of the greatest kings of Judah because he successfully resisted the Assyrians and

kept the kingdom of Judah independent. He also followed the laws of Moses and listened to his prophets.

## ANXIOUS TIMES

So, two generations of Jews had come of age under the rule of Uzziah. When Isaiah wrote that this was the year that King Uzziah died, he wasn't just talking about a date. He was talking about a year of crisis that everyone remembered. It was like Americans saying, in the year that JFK was shot instead of saying 1963. Millions of Americans today remember the grief and anxiety they felt when the president died. They remember the fear of another world war, imminent social collapse, and other threats. 1963 is a date; the year JFK died is feeling.

In the year that King Uzziah died means that Isaiah's vision came at a time when the kingdom was at crisis point. The defender of the realm who promoted justice and kept the people safe had died. People were anxious. Would the new ruler follow the path of righteousness, justice, and peace of his predecessor, or would he be one of those arrogant despots who pillaged his own people to reward his cronies, who offended allies and enemies so that the kingdom was left divided and vulnerable? Would everything they had depended on be swept away because of a wicked ruler? Spoiler alert: the answer was yes.

People in Judah were anxious, but I'm sure that Isaiah was more anxious than most because he was a smart, well-informed, and engaged religious leader who served in the temple. He was probably an advisor to the king. Isaiah's job was to remind the king and princes of Judah of their obligations to the people under the law of God. In other words, Isaiah was one of the elites in Judah who helped shape public opinion and public policy. He was the one who had to remind the king that the Bible demands that his followers show mercy to strangers and sojourners in the land, that God expected the king to unite the nation rather than causing chaos. King **Uzziah** had listened to the priests and prophets, and followed the law. What would his successor do? What should the prophets do to help the nation? Isaiah was anxious, and it was in that time of anxiety that he received his calling and his mission from God.

## THE EXTRAORDINARY IN THE ORDINARY

In our passage for this morning, Isaiah was performing his normal duties of presenting offerings to God in the Temple and praying for divine assistance. I'm sure he had this many times before, but I imagine that he prayed a little more fervently the year that King Uzziah died. Just like a modern pastor, Isaiah said the proper prayers, sang the psalms for the day, and made offerings the same way year after year. He was in a sacred place where the incense was burned, but Isaiah didn't expect anything different to happen this time in the temple. He was following the routines of worshiping an invisible God, just as we do Sunday after Sunday. Isaiah served God, but he never expected to meet God.

But in the year that King Uzziah died, something extraordinary happened. Isaiah had a vision of the God whom he worshiped. He describes it kind of like a modern sci-fi or fantasy movie where a portal to a different dimension opens up. He got to see behind the veil of our normal reality and glimpsed a wonderful world beyond. He saw the magnificent throne of God in the heavens and the glory of God filling the Temple.

One thing that scholars of religion and religious experience agree on is that religious visions use symbols and images that the people who have them are familiar with. It's just like the way our dreams use images that we already know, but in uncommon ways. Or the way that an artist will take what is familiar and transform it into something sublime. In Isaiah's case, he pictured God as a king on a throne like a king, since he was familiar with kings sitting on thrones. But God's throne was more magnificent than the throne of Uzziah.

#### SERAPHIM

But that's not all Isaiah saw. He saw and heard the seraphim acting like the king's court. We usually call these heavenly figures angels, but the Seraphim were nothing like the cute little cherubs we see in Renaissance paintings. They were terrifying and bizarre. Each had six wings, four for hiding behind and two for flying. Wings covered their faces because humans could not bear to look at them because of their brilliance. Madeleine L'Engle, who wrote *A Wrinkle in Time* and *Many Waters*, did a great job of imaging what it would be like to encounter a heavenly being like a seraph in our world. It would be frightening and humbling to meet a creature so unlike anything we've ever encountered.

Isaiah also felt the whole temple shake as the seraphim sang the triple Holy or the Trisagion with thundering voices. We sang the hymn Holy, Holy, Holy beautifully here at Home Church, but even at our best we cannot make this building shake on its foundations. But the voices of the seraphim shook the Temple and Isaiah trembled in astonishment. The power of heaven is stronger than the Temple made by humans.

## THE SONG

What was the message of their song? The whole earth is full of God's glory. The whole earth. Every day. The whole earth is full of God's glory, and yet we rarely notice it. The whole earth is full of God's glory, and yet we somehow go through our days without being astonished. We rarely have to gasp for breath because we are overwhelmed by the beauty of creation around us. Sure we might notice a nice sunset or a pretty flower, but keep ourselves from being astonished. Most of the time we walk through life unaware of the miracles around us, unaware of the glory of God. We keep our defenses up and our blinders on.

Do we ever gaze into the deep blue of the sky and fall into rapture? Sometimes, perhaps. I'll always remember being at the Grand Canyon one night with two of my daughters when they were young. Sarah looked into the expanse of the indigo sky with its thousands of stars and whispered, "I feel so small." That evening we get a whiff of the glory of God by staring into the heavens, but we did not see God's glory the way Isaiah did. Even so, that brief moment remains fixed in my mind. We did not get a revelation or a mission, other than that awareness that the universe is vast and we are small, yet we are loved with an infinite love.

The seraphim shook Isaiah up. They overcame his ordinary blindness by singing to him about the glory of God. He was a priest, but he needed to learn that God's glory fills the earth. Any place can be a sacred place; any moment can be an opportunity for revelation. The seraphim sang that the glory of God is not just in temples, churches, and shrines that we erect for worship. We may see it in any place, at any time. For Isaiah that moment came while he was anxious about the death of King Uzziah. At the moment of crisis, God revealed his presence. Moments of crisis can be moments of enlightenment and clarity.

## ASTONISHED

What did this priest and prophet Israel do when he saw the throne of God and heard the seraphim sing? You might think that he would be ready for this moment since he was a priest and prophet. You might think that he would be happy to finally see the invisible God he worshiped.

Instead, Isaiah cried out in fear. Isaiah knew the Bible, knew the rituals, knew the sacrifices, knew the ablutions and absolutions, and knew all of the formulas of proper worship, but he was still unprepared for this mystical experience. Let's not be hard on him. Think what it would be like if you had this kind of vision one Sunday here at Home Church. What if our worship opened us up to a vision of true glory and splendor of God? Isaiah was overwhelmed, just as we would be. He was astonished in the fullest sense of that word. Like the baby that discovers something new, wonderful, and a little frightening, Isaiah cried out. He said: "I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips!"

## TREMENDUM MYSTERIUM

About a century ago, a scholar in Germany named Rudolf Otto wrote a book called *The Idea of the Holy* (in English). He studied mystical experiences from many of the world's religions and invented the word "numinous" to describe the unique experience of encountering the Holy One who is beyond our understanding. Otto observed that humans who have religious experiences are drawn toward the Holy One and yet are frightened at the same time. He called this experience of desire and fear as the Tremendous Mystery or Frightening Awesomeness. When mere mortals encounter God, we become intensely aware of our unworthiness, our sinfulness, our weakness. Isaiah felt like he had lost his bearings. He did not recognize the world he thought he knew. He was frightened and wanted to hide because he was just a man.

But then a seraph took a coal from the brazier that was burning incense in the Temple. The seraph touched Isaiah's lips with the burning coal. Readers often get upset over this action since a burning coal would do serious damage to someone's lips, but we need to remember this was all a vision. This was the kind of symbolism we see in dreams. The burning coal was a way to convince Isaiah that he was indeed worthy to stand before God and listen to God's

commandment. Isaiah had been chosen and now was purified. He could listen to what God was telling him to do and say.

## MISSION

In my studies, I've read several books written by mystics like Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart. One thing I've learned is that mystics use a lot of words to try and explain something they confess is beyond our words or even our ability to understand. It's hard to tell someone what it is like to have your mind blown and your world changed. People, including some mystics themselves, often focus too much on the experience. They want to be thrilled by the supernatural, much like some people love to have an adrenaline rush with extreme sports or roller coasters. The experience of astonishment is wonderful for those who have a religious experience, just like the astonishment babies experience. Getting a vision of a deeper reality can be frightening and beautiful at the same time, but it is what comes next that is even more important.

God did not display his glory to Isaiah for Isaiah's amusement or to prove God's existence. God had a mission for the priest. Isaiah **could not** stay in the Temple basking in the glory of God; **he was chosen for a task**. God asked whom shall I send? Isaiah gave the famous reply. "Send me!"

Last week in worship we sang a hymn about this. God asked whom shall I send and Isaiah said Send me. Without asking what he would have to do, without seeing a job description or signing a waiver, Isaiah accepted his mission. God was going to send him out into the world to speak for God. Isaiah was called to be a prophet who speaks truth to power and promotes justice and mercy. As we heard, it was not a pleasant message of encouragement but a message of judgment. Another time we can discuss the meaning of the message.

## CONCLUSION

This morning, in the year 2025, let's focus on the power of astonishment to lead us into revelation, which in turns calls to speak up in the public square. In this year 2025, perhaps some of us will see the glory of God and hear the voice of God asking Whom Shall I Send? With fear and trembling, what will our answer be?