

Called to Sell Bad News
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Isaiah 6:1-13

"Then I said, how long, O Lord? And he said,
Until the cities lie waste without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate.
... Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again,
like a terabinth or an oak whose stump remains standing
when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump." (Isaiah 6:11, 13, NRSV)

I don't know about you, but if God had said this to me, I'm not so sure I would want to repeat it out in the public square. It's not good news. Isaiah has been asked to tell the people that trouble was coming their way, the kind of trouble from which escape was not going to be possible. If you're wondering if you've heard the first half of this reading before, you more than likely have. It is the Old Testament selection for Trinity Sunday in some years, and it is also frequently used at ordinations. It almost always stops at verse 8. That is, it ends with Isaiah saying to God, "Here I am, send me!" and leaves out the hard thing that God asks Isaiah. Let's face it: very few people want to deliver, much less hear, the message that they just don't get it, and that they are to keep doing so until "the whole thing crumbles. Not just 90%. Everything." Who'd want that job, if they knew before they said yes that it would entail so much gloom and doom?¹

¹ Samuel Giere, "Commentary on Isaiah 6:1-8 [9-13]."
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/fifth-Sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-isaiah-61-8-9-13-2> [accessed February 4, 2025].

As it turns out, more people than you might think eagerly take something like this on. It's the part of saying "yes" to God that isn't exactly discussed a whole lot: how do we respond when that thing involves delivering bad news, which may or may not put us at risk of public humiliation, or worse?

We keep doing it, of course, because it is God who does the asking. It means there's not much of a choice but to say yes. Once God gets God's hooks into us, God does not let go until we agree to do that very thing which God asks. (Remember the story of Jonah: he said no, he would not go to Nineveh and tell them to repent, so God had a giant fish swallow him for a few days until he changed his mind.) That's where vocation – participating in God's work – begins. It's how we are as God's people in and for the world. God's invitation to join in doing God's work is a scary one, whether it comes as we walk into the temple and see visions of flaming seraphs holding hot coals to our lips, or a more gradual realization that we need to do, or become, a specific thing. Whatever that is, the job is to serve God. That's it.² And that is exactly what the prophet Isaiah, and his colleagues, do. It is they who are charged with delivering the news to Israel and its leaders that they need to clean up their collective acts, or else.

Who exactly was Isaiah? The name is a familiar one. Pieces of the book bearing his name are part of the core texts we use to explain the how God fulfilled ancient promises through the birth of Jesus. This prophet may actually have been an entire school of prophets by the time it was all said and done. At the very least, what we have as The Book of Isaiah is the product of several centuries' worth of prophecies and editorial work to string them together in a way that made sense. The earliest parts go

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), 29-30.

back at least as far as the 8th century BCE. This chapter, which is Isaiah's call story, doesn't give us much in the way of biographical information. We learn only that Isaiah is a faithful attender of worship; that God has asked him to "go for us;" and has given him the words and authority to say what God needs to tell the people.

In 738 BCE, the year that King Uzziah died, life was fairly good in ancient Israel. Despite the royal household having produced a series of rulers who had neglected the part of their duties which involved being of service to the people, the city was a vibrant place and the people were mostly doing okay. But looming just over the horizon were the forces of the Assyrian Empire – forces which would soon sack Jerusalem, cart off its people, and conquer the northern part of the kingdom. Isaiah's words here are meant to set up the reader for that eventuality, as well as the Babylonian invasion and exile which would follow about 150 years later. The final editing of this passage, which occurred after that period of exile, leaves some room for hope through the image of the tree stump at the very end.³ The message is that all is not lost. Even though the people refuse to understand the consequences of their actions and will be punished severely, God will leave just enough behind to start again when the time is right.

What are we to make of God's demand? An article I read this week framed it like this: "[Perhaps] if Isaiah had been more keenly aware of what YHWH wanted from him, he might have skipped worship that day; he surely would have wanted to take back those fateful words about asking to be sent... Isaiah's call is not for sweet preaching of comfort and joy, but rather for harsh demands for a people lost and far from the ways of their God, however much they think they are in the will of that God. Isaiah's only hope,

³ John J. Collins, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2004), 309-311.

and our only hope too, is that from the tiny smoldering stump of a blasted tree may come the 'holy seed' of the future with God. There are times for comfort, but Isaiah's time was not one of those. Rather, YHWH has called him to witness to the struggle to understand and join the community that searches to live out the rule of God.

"In 740 B.C.E., Israel was far from such a rule. In [2025] it seems equally fair to say that we are far from it, too. Our call from our God... may also be a difficult one."⁴ In these troubling times, may we too find the courage to say yes – yes to doing the small things of showing up for our neighbors, and yes to the larger things like speaking unpleasant truths to the powerful, when the situation requires them.

⁴ John C. Holbert, "Healed and Sent: Reflections on Isaiah 6:1-8 (9-13)."
<https://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/healed-and-sent-john-holbert-05-29-2012> [accessed February 4, 2025].