**We’re All in This Together**

**Text: Isaiah 6:1-8**

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In the year that King Uzziah died, Judah was drifting toward disaster. The economy was strong, but poverty was growing. Nationalism was on the rise, but the nation would soon be under attack. And religious rifts were tearing apart the body politic.

We know something about such threats and division. In the year that Dr. King died, our nation was similarly divided between wealth and poverty, patriotism and public critique, as riots and anti-war protests filled the streets, and tens of thousands of Americans served, and thousands died, in the rice paddies of Southeast Asia.

But we’ve seen worse. In the year that President Lincoln died, and the four years before it, 640,000 Americans died; slain by the hands of their fellow countrymen, at Shiloh and Antietam; Gettysburg and the Wilderness.

Our nation is divided today, but we’ve seen worse, and survived worse. We’ve fought each other, and the federal government has been gridlocked, on multiple occasions; but we’ve pulled ourselves back together. Or, better yet, we’ve been pulled back together by a Providential power beyond ourselves who has never abandoned us, even when we have abandoned the Holy One, and one another.

It was that same Holy One who raised up a mighty prophet in the year that King Uzziah died. And in Isaiah’s efforts to bring Judah back together in covenantal relationship with God, there is wisdom that the Church can use as we seek a degree of national reconciliation today.

We can begin where Isaiah began: with the awesome majesty of God. I love the language that describes the indescribable moment when Isaiah is caught-up in just a little bit of the glory of God. God is so great that only the hem of God’s robe can fill the vast Temple. Not the fullness of God, not even the robe of God, but just the *hem* of the robe of God can fill that great space.

But it’s not just the Temple: the whole earth is filled with God’s glory. But not only the earth: the whole Creation can’t contain the glory of the One who created it. And Isaiah is humbled in the presence of this transcendent majesty. He says, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” It is a little bit like what happens when we stare up at the stars on a summer night. We’re so overwhelmed by the enormity of the cosmos that the words of the Psalmist come to mind: “When I look at the heavens, the work of your fingers…what are human beings, that you are mindful of them; mortals, that you care for them?” Humility, in the face of God’s majesty, is the starting point for wisdom and reconciliation.

Isaiah’s ministry of national reconciliation begins with the aw-ful majesty of God. His starting point is not some biased religious or political perspective that might push the sides further apart; no, his staring point is that transcendent Reality in which we all live and move and have our being. The prophet’s very name points to that Reality. Isaiah means “*Yahweh* is salvation.” This church is not your salvation, your political philosophy is not your salvation, your accumulated wealth is not your salvation, our nation is not your salvation; *God* is salvation. We are grounded in a Reality that transcends each of our egos and all of our self-interest. When we’re caught up in the awesome wonder of that Reality, we can’t help but let go of our differences and embrace one another as children of the one God.

I was on a prayer retreat many years ago. Had to be silent for an entire week. You can understand how difficult that was for me. A week of silence and praying with the scriptures. And I came out of that week with a tremendous sense of the wonder and the presence of God.

I went straight from the retreat to spending the weekend with a new friend. And this guy, I soon discovered, was even further to the political right than I was to the left; which is to say – in those days, at least – that he was almost off the chart. But here’s the thing: we listened to each other; we spoke openly with each other; we each had a sense of being grounded in that wondrous Reality that transcended the pettiness of our partial perspectives and bound us together in a covenant of mutual respect. That’s what can happen when, like Isaiah, you’re starting point is the mystery of the majesty of Almighty God.

Isaiah’s ministry of reconciliation begins with the majesty of God and moves immediately to humility. He says, “I am a man of unclean lips.” In other words, he knows himself to be a sinner *who speaks something less than the truth*. He says that his *lips* are unclean. He may not mean that he’s speaking lies, but maybe he’s aware that whatever truth he is speaking may not contain as much truth as he wants to claim for it.

When we start with the mystical majesty of God, we are struck by the pettiness of the partial perspectives and pre-conceived notions that emerge from our unclean lips. That’s partly what’s tearing us apart as a nation: clinging to the little bit of truth that can be found in each of our partial perspectives, and being closed to the wider Truth that can be found *beyond* those perspectives. I mean, if we’d just stop and listen to each other for a while; and listen as well to networks and blogs and other sources of information beyond those that simply repeat what we already agree with, maybe we might learn something!

We need to do this because we really don’t know as much as we think we know; none of us does. And none of our favorite sources do. St. Paul says – in his wonderful ode to love in 1 Corinthians 13 – St. Paul says that we see in a mirror dimly; he says that we know only in part; he says that our knowledge is imperfect.

Imagining that we know more than we really do is partly what divides us. Like the German immigrant home (and forgive me if I’ve told this story before) the German immigrant home some 125 years ago that was badly divided by a family fight. The older generation, born in Germany, felt that they should be worshipping and reading the Bible in German, while the younger generation, born in America, wanted to embrace English. In the midst of one of their arguments the matriarch of the family stormed out of the room and said, “Well, I know one thing for sure: Jesus spoke German!”

We need the humility to recognize that we don’t know as much as we think we know. Which is why Reinhold Niebuhr once prayed for the wisdom to see the truth in someone else’s error, and the error in one’s own truth.

Isaiah’s ministry begins with God’s majesty and moves to humility. And if we all follow that same journey, then we just might find ourselves standing on common ground. Indeed, if we drill down beneath our partial truths, pre-conceived notions and self-interested perspectives, we *will* find common ground. Because the Holy One who is our starting point *is* our common ground. Again, God is the One in whom we – all of us – live and move and have our being; God is – as Paul Tillich famously said – the Ground of Being; *all* of our being. The common ground is found when we stop and listen to each other; and the common ground is found when we come together in God’s Word. Take another look at what Isaiah says in his moment of humility. He says, “I am a man of unclean lips,” and he says, “I live among a *people* of unclean lips.” In other words, Isaiah – and indeed the grand sweep of biblical faith – locates sin both in the individual and in the collective. We fail to find common ground when I say that sin is rooted *only* in the human heart and you say that it’s rooted *only* in unjust laws or regulations or social structures. My partial truth that says that sin is an individual issue and your partial truth that says that sin is a collective issue obscures God’s truth that sin is *both* an individual *and* a collective issue. For example, let’s imagine a conversation between two people. I might say that guns don’t kill, people do; it’s an *individual* problem. You say that laws that permit individuals to have guns is the issue; it’s a *collective* problem. Maybe we’re both right. I say that individuals who refuse to take responsibility for their addiction is the problem. You say that addiction is a disease that will only be cured when government devotes enough resources to health care. Maybe we’re both right. I say that poverty is caused by individuals who refuse to work. You say that poverty is caused by an underfunded public education system that isn’t preparing young people for today’s jobs. Maybe we’re both right. And maybe God’s wisdom that says that sin is rooted in my heart *and* in the powers and principalities of this present age; maybe that’s the common ground upon which we both need to be standing. “I am a man of unclean lips,” Isaiah says, “and I live among a people of unclean lips,” and when we say, with Isaiah (1:18), “Come, let us reason together,” maybe we can find that elusive commonality that can help us to find our way back into community, back into covenantal relationship, back to a place where we can walk and work together as humble servants under the majesty of Almighty God.

And the thing is, it works! In a recent Ecaller piece I spoke of the Roman Catholic wedding mass that Helen and I attended 2 weeks ago. At the reception, I was seated next to a young man who has a bit of a libertarian streak. He graduated from Notre Dame 3 years ago with a degree in economics. So, you’ve got a liberal Protestant pastor talking to a libertarian Catholic economist. Those are *very* different perspectives. But we found ourselves agreeing on some things: like the need for stronger community-based organizations where youth can be mentored and civil behavior modeled; such as churches, Boys and Girls Clubs and Scouting. And, we both think there should be a guaranteed annual income: large enough so that no one will starve, but small enough so that there’s still an incentive to get a good job. The idea would be to combine a bunch of federal programs payments into one check that folks would get each month. From his perspective, that would get the government and its multitude of social programs off people’s backs. From my perspective, it would give people a one-stop opportunity to be adequately housed and fed. We found that common ground within the space of 10 minutes! It can be done! We can do this in the United States of America!! We can do this in the Church.

But the neatest example of common ground occurred during the wedding itself. As we began to say the Lord’s Prayer, the bride’s father reached out to the groom’s family, and they joined hands across the aisle. And then the next row followed suit, and then the next, and then the next. By the time we’d finished the Lord’s Prayer – even the abbreviated Roman Catholic version – you had Protestants and Catholics, liberals and conservatives, young and old literally reaching across the aisle, praying together as one community.

In the year that President Lincoln died, a priest was offering communion at the Episcopal church in Richmond, Virginia. When his invitation filled that sacred space, a black man, recently liberated from the collective sin of slavery, came forward, and knelt at the communion rail. The priest froze. Everyone froze. The man knelt there, waiting to receive the body and blood of Jesus, and no one knew what to do. Until a very dignified white man stepped forward on that last day of April of 1865, and knelt beside the black man, and they both held out their hands to the priest. And the white man’s name was Robert E. Lee.

Each of us can be a source of reconciliation when we humbly kneel together before the alter of the Lord. Which is why each of us is called to say, with Isaiah, “Here am I; send me.”