

## WHEN GOD SPEAKS

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(ISAIAH 6:1-8 NIV) *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a*

*man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" <sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." <sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*

This Hebrew text is so important to the understanding of our faith. It is one of only a few Hebrew passages for which there is general consensus among scholars that it is an "**authentic first-person account.**" Along with the last chapter of Jeremiah, it gives us some of our most graphic insight into the life of the "Kingdom of Israel" during the last century-and-a-half of its existence.

Jeremiah describes the day when Nebuchadnezzar's troops breached the walls of Jerusalem, over-ran the city and destroyed the temple. The description is clear and graphic, and you can almost hear the screams and smell the smoke and feel the grit in your teeth.

The Isaiah text describes a personal religious experience about 150 years earlier. It is a "visionary" experience, full of images which, while they are very clear and graphic, represent things unfamiliar to us: "seraphim, with six wings..." What's a "seraphim"?

But the story is crucial to our understanding of a doctrine of divine calling to ministry. It has had profound influence on the formation of Hebrew and Christian religious traditions; and it is in the words of the one who experienced it! Isaiah was "called" to the ministry through a soul-shaking experience of the reality of God. He saw One inexpressibly exalted, whose "holiness" marked such a stark contrast to himself that, no matter how thoroughly he had purified himself and cleansed himself according to the ritual requirements, in the presence of holiness he was unclean. But even in the recognition of his own uncleanness, there came a cleansing by a sovereign act of grace, and a commission to speak a word which was not his but God's.

And the validity of the experience is validated by its results in the prophet's life and work!

But it's such a strange story. How do we get "inside" it? There is a feeling about the story that can be grasped by anyone who ever stood in childhood, forehead pressed against the door to an older sibling's room, listening to the sound of laughter and music on the other side, and crying, through runny nose and teary eyes, "Let me in!"

I didn't have an older brother or sister. But in my neighborhood, when I was, oh, eight or nine, there was a clubhouse: a magnificent structure of scrap lumber and cardboard, and so full of mystery and secrets.

It belonged to some "older boys": at least ten or eleven—maybe even twelve. But my friends and I couldn't go in. We were too little.

We sneaked around it on occasion; but the door was padlocked, and Ralph said they kept a big Doberman Pinscher inside.

They did let Kenny go inside once, just for a minute; but they said I was too little. I never did see inside it.

Isaiah's story is about such a place: magnificent; full of mystery: a special room in the temple, called "the Holy of Holies." Inside was the Ark of the Covenant, a sacred shrine to Israel: a wooden box, covered with gold leaf. It contained Moses' rod and the tablets of stone on which the finger of God had written the Ten Commandments. On top of the ark were golden creatures called "Seraphim:" part lion, part man, part angel.

But most important of all, the top of the Ark, between the Seraphim, was the throne upon which sat God, himself.

No one was allowed inside, except the high priest; and even he could go in only one day of the year: on the "Day of Atonement," the Jewish new year—Yom Kippur. And when he went inside, if hadn't totally prepared—if were not completely pure, he would not come out alive; so, they tied a rope around his waist, just in case, so they could drag his carcass back out.

There would be days of preparation: ceremonial washing of the body; special clothing; special offerings were made, specific chants were performed.

And then the "Day of Atonement". The religious ritual on this day portrayed the divine king returning to his temple in a processional triumph, victor over the forces of chaos. In his Temple he was enthroned as king, creator, and judge, and there he decided the fate of his people for the coming year.

The procession would wind through the streets of the city, ending up at the temple, where the people would gather in the outer courts, where the priests would sacrifice a lamb. The priests would collect blood from the lamb, and while the people were chanting psalms back and forth, responsively, the priests would set pots of smoldering incense at the entrance to the "Holy of Holies." Finally, the high Priest would go in and sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the top of the Ark of the Covenant.

It is during this ceremony, apparently, that Isaiah reports, "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord."

The vision came to Isaiah apparently when he was participating as an official in the ceremony, standing with the priests "between the porch and the altar" and gazing through the open curtains of the sanctuary, now filled with the swirling smoke of incense, toward that innermost chamber where the Lord dwelt in "thick darkness."

And as the people chanted their psalms, the Spirit of the Lord came upon Isaiah, and this scene that probably was familiar to Isaiah, was transformed by a divine vision so the anthem of the temple ritual was heard as if sung by heavenly beings: "**Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts!**"

It was only a glimpse, a sudden overpowering realization that he was in the presence of the Majesty on high. The throne, the royal robe, and the attendant beings are described, but not the appearance of the One on the throne. And the effect is far more

powerful than such attempts to describe the appearance of God as are found in Ezekiel, Daniel and Revelation. All he says is that "the foundations of the thresholds shook, and the house was filled with smoke."

And in the presence of that reality, he heard the call: " **Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?**"

**And when God speaks...** Do you remember the commercial that said, "When E.F. Hutton speaks, people listen?" Well, **WHEN GOD SPEAKS, E.F. HUTTON LISTENS!**

And when God speaks, there always is a response: "Yes." "No." And as the banner from the 60's said, "Even not to respond is to respond."

And Isaiah said, 'Here am I. Send me!'" (Isaiah 6:8 NIV)

In that same community where the clubhouse was, a part of the weekly routine was the Saturday matinee at the local picture show. My dad would give me a quarter. The picture show cost 10-cents; a bag of popcorn was a nickel, and a coke was a nickel. That left another nickel to call home. I was supposed to let it ring once, and hang up; and dad would know it was me and it was time to pick me up. And I always had to give him the nickel.

I saw all my heroes at the Saturday matinee; and like Willie Nelson, "All my heroes were cowboys:" Roy Rogers, Whip Wilson, Lash Larue, Johnny Mack Brown... And I never just watched the movie; I lived it. I became the hero.

And then we'd go back outside, blinking in the late afternoon sun, and go home, and out into the back yard, and all the next week would "be" Roy Rogers, or Hopalong Cassidy.

What would it take—what could I do—how could you prepare so that our people came to church, and become so involved with the stories and the characters of the faith, so sensitive to a Holy Presence that, upon leaving this place, they'd go home and all the next week would be that.

The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him.