

Hespeler, 30 May 2021 © Scott McAndless

Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17

Isaiah yawns. He feels bad for doing it. He can see his parents shooting dark looks at him from the opposite side of the room, but he really can't help it. This ceremony just seems to keep going on and on and he is bored. He just wants it to be over and for the people to move onto the feast.

I guess you can't really blame Isaiah for being bored. He is hardly the first person in the history of the world to be bored during a religious service that has gone on too long, and he certainly won't be the last. And it doesn't help that Isaiah is still a young man with the common affliction of impatience that many young people have.

But it is also more than that, it is also that this whole ceremony seems to be a meaningless farce. All of the leading citizens of the City of Jerusalem have come together at the temple to witness the enthronement of the new king, Jotham son of Uzziah. It is supposed to be an exciting and magnificent event, full of pomp and circumstance and even a little bit of suspense – with everyone wondering whether or not Jotham will be accepted as king by Yahweh and his priests – but everybody knows how meaningless all of that is.

Jotham has already been running the entire government of the nation for over a decade during his father's illness. All of the ministers and the priests are already beholden to him. This ceremony is going to change nothing in the day-to-day reality of everything about the kingdom. And yet the people are expected to ooh and ah at the spectacle and pretend like this is the most important thing that has ever happened in Jerusalem. Isaiah just can't help but find the whole thing so ridiculous.

High and Lifted Up

But there King Jotham is, high and lifted up on a raised platform that has been built just for this occasion. He is wearing the most sumptuous robes imaginable with a train so long that it wraps around and around the temple several times.

Four high ranking attendants hover over him as he sits, like flies circle over a cut of meat in the marketplace. They also wear gorgeous robes with long sleeves and hems, but, of course, each one has carefully dressed so as not to outshine the king. They flatter him, telling him how great he is, and they repeat every flattery three times: "Mighty, mighty, mighty is the Lord our King Jotham. The whole earth is full of his glory." Isaiah rolls his eyes every time he hears such effusive praise.

The Oppressive Incense

It is not just the plodding pace of the ceremony that is making Isaiah feel so weary, however. It is also the infernal incense. The priests have filled every pot they can with the stuff, and it is sending up great clouds of smoke – so much so that it has become difficult to even see to the other side of the hall. The smoke, together with the soft and repetitive music, is sending Isaiah into a kind of dreamlike state.

Presumably the clouds of incense are supposed to make the people feel that they are closer to the presence of Yahweh in his heaven, but Isaiah suspects that the priests might have another motive in burning so much of it. Isaiah has heard the story, everyone has, and he cannot help but think that the priests are taking advantage of this ceremony to remind the new king of it. In the drowsiness induced by the incense smoke, Isaiah finds himself imagining how the events must have played out.



The Incense Incident

It all happened over a decade ago, but nobody has really stopped talking about it ever since. King Uzziah got into a dispute with the priests. He pointed out to them, and rightly so, that the kings of the House of David had long had a special relationship with Yahweh. And so he argued that it would be a good thing if, from time to time, the king could make a sacrifice of incense before Yahweh in the temple in recognition of his near divine status. The priests, and especially the chief priest Azariah, strenuously disagreed.

But the king was not interested in hearing their arguments and warnings. He just went ahead and did what he felt he had a right to do. He walked right into the sanctuary carrying a brazier from which sweet smoke was rising. The priest confronted him, warning the king that, if he dared to go forward with this mad plan of his, he would be cursed by God.

The king just shrugged it off, of course, but no one ever forgot what the priest had said. King Uzziah woke up one morning weeks later to discover white blotches on his forehead. He covered them up and attempted to go on with his day, but the next day they had spread and soon they could be hidden no longer. People began to react to him in horror; the king was a leper. He was unclean.

And so it was that the king had to withdraw from all public life and the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom fell to his son. And you can be sure that the priests did not let anyone forget that the leprosy had come after the chief priest had uttered his curse. And now, clearly, all of the priests were going to make sure that the new king, Jotham, didn't forget it. It was they who had filled the enthronement chamber with oppressive amounts of incense smoke as they exulted in their victory over royal prerogatives.

The Holy King

Achoo! The smoke induced sneeze suddenly pulled Isaiah out of his reverie and he forced his attention back to the spectacle that was being played out upon the dais. It seemed that the hovering attendants had progressed in their praise of the new king. They had now moved on to proclaiming that he was holy – that he was set apart from all other normal human beings. “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord our King Jotham,” they cried out even louder than they had yet cried. “The whole earth is full of his glory.”

Isaiah could tell from the angry looks on the faces of the priests that they were not happy to hear such rhetoric from the royal court. They had begun to argue that holiness was a description that should be reserved only for priests who had been consecrated. It had been a sore point in their relationship with Jotham's father and it looked like it would continue to be with his son.

Isaiah is Triggered

Suddenly, Isaiah was completely distracted from the ongoing struggle for authority between the monarchy and the priesthood however. The shouting from the attendants and the ever-increasing volume of smoke had triggered something in him. He found himself staring at the thresholds of the temple and he suddenly had the strange, and yet distressingly familiar sensation that they were shaking violently, that the whole earth was shaking.

The Earthquake

This was not the first time that Isaiah had suffered this kind of episode. It had happened to him before in times of great stress and in reaction to loud noises. These kinds of situations made him return to the most traumatic moment he had ever experienced.

Isaiah's first memory was of when the great earthquake struck his city. A young boy at the time, he

had been alone in the house and had been terrified as the ground shook, pieces of ceiling fell and the furniture tumbled. He had felt sure that it was the end of the world. When his parents found him later, they were frankly amazed that he had survived, as a piece of the wall had come very close to smashing in his head.

Isaiah had escaped it all unscathed in his body, which many people told him marked him as one who was specially favoured and chosen by Yahweh. But Isaiah did not feel particularly favoured for he was deeply wounded in his spirit. He had cried out in terror at every aftershock and tremor he had felt in the weeks that followed the great quake and, in the years since, he had been plagued by these repeated sensations that it was all happening again.

The Vision

As it had sometimes done before, this sensation that he was in another earthquake took Isaiah out of himself. He entered into a strange state where he began to see everything very differently. As he looked now towards the platform where the king was enthroned, which suddenly seemed much higher than it had before, instead of the king's attendants, he saw cherubim – strange unearthly creatures – and the flapping sleeves and hems of the attendants were transformed into wings that covered their faces and feet and allowed them to hover in the air.

And, as Isaiah turned his gaze to the man who sat on the throne amongst them, he realized that it was no longer Jotham who sat there. It was not a man, but a God. And the train of his robe was now so long that it filled the entire temple.

Isaiah is Afraid

Isaiah was suddenly filled with dread. He had seen Yahweh and no one could see Yahweh and live! He jumped and cried out, greatly disturbing the people standing near him, and even waking up one young man behind him. But, as people often do in this kind of situation, most of them just decided to pretend as if nothing had happened.

Isaiah did not have that luxury. He was terrified. His heart was filled with only one thought: **“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, Yahweh Sabaoth!”**

Isaiah is cleansed

Isaiah was completely beside himself, but his strange vision was not yet finished. As he watched, one of the cherubim flew over to one of the braziers where the incense burned. It took some tongs and picked up a hot burning coal. It then flew over to where Isaiah stood, and he felt a burning sensation as the hot coal was pushed against his own lips. And then the creature spoke to him in a strange hissing voice that Isaiah heard only inside his own head: **“Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”** And it was as if a great burden was lifted from Isaiah's shoulders.

And because of that, when Isaiah heard the voice of Yahweh booming from the platform and saying, **“Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”** he was not afraid as he would have been but moments before. Instead, he spoke up boldly and much to the shock of everyone else around him. **“Here am I;”** he cried, **“send me!”** And it was from that day forward that Isaiah was recognized by all who knew him in Jerusalem as one who saw the truth like few others, as one of the prophets.

The importance of Isaiah's Vision

What happened to Isaiah that day was, as far as I'm concerned, one of the greatest moments in the

history of the people of God. It was a vision, that is to say that it was something that happened entirely within Isaiah's own mind. But I have a conviction about visions. I would argue that just because something happens entirely inside somebody's mind, that doesn't necessarily mean that it is not real, and it certainly doesn't mean that it isn't true. Isaiah gained deep insight into the nature of God that day and what he saw has greatly influenced how we conceive of God to this very day.

What Prompted it?

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that it happened much like I have described it. Isaiah says it happened in the year that the old king died and what he describes seems very much like the common enthronement ritual of a new king in the ancient Near East, there is every reason to believe that he saw this vision while he was attending the enthronement of the new king.

We also know from the Book of Chronicles that there had been an incident in the temple some ten years earlier when the new king's father had tried to sacrifice incense and, shortly afterwards, he had been afflicted with leprosy and forced to hand the reins of government over to his son. There had also been a massive earthquake during the reign of Uzziah. It is mentioned by the Prophets Amos and Zechariah and has been confirmed by archaeologists who estimate that the quake must have been about an eight on the Richter scale.

Can you imagine just how frightening that would have been to those people who did not even understand how such things could happen? And if Isaiah, years later, was having visions that included shaking thresholds at the temple, I don't think it's a huge stretch to suggest that it is quite likely that Isaiah was suffering from some post-traumatic symptoms after what he had experienced in that earthquake.

What We Can Learn from Isaiah's Vision

I find Isaiah's vision to be enormously fascinating, but you might well ask what does what he saw have to teach us? I think there is a lesson in his experience. I think there is every reason to assume that, when Isaiah saw what he saw, he was a man who was deeply disturbed by some of the things that he had lived through. He struggled with post-traumatic stress and perhaps some sort of dissociative disorder – at least that's what the initial part of his vision sounds like to me.

Isaiah had been damaged by the events of his life, just like all of us, to various degrees, have been affected by the things that have happened to us. But we see here that Isaiah's unique traumas and experiences put him into a frame of mind and position that allowed him to see God in a truly unique way that continues to affect how people think of God to this very day. Even more important, it gave to Isaiah a unique voice and insight that allowed him to speak to the many trials that were coming for the people of Judah.

I cannot help but think that if we were to bring all that we are, both the things in which we've been strengthened and the things in which we have been damaged, and open ourselves up to the vision that might come, we too could be given such an extraordinary opportunity. You may have suffered damage or loss in your life, but you too can cry out, **"Here am I, send me."** You may have limits or disabilities or problems that weigh you down, but these things may uniquely gift you to bring hope to others. Will you cry, **"Here am I, send me"**? Or maybe you're just bored with conventional religion and cynical about the ceremonies that the world makes too much of? Maybe there is a calling in that too. Will you say it? **"Here am I, send me!"**