

## “Humility and Chutzpah”

Sermon by Oby Ballinger

Edina Morningside Community Church; November 13, 2016

### Isaiah 6:1-8

*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. 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. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.*

*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!” Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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.” 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 is a hard Sunday to be a preacher—a number of my colleagues have asked for prayers as our sermons come together. This is a hard Sunday to be a churchgoer as well, to be someone who cares enough about healthy, hopeful community to show up today, even when the state of politics is on everyone’s mind (including the preacher’s). Some of us are crushed by the election results, and fear the worst of what President Trump’s America could mean for children, refugees, immigrants, people of color, queer folk, the sick, the poor, and the planet. Others of us are relieved by the surprising developments of Tuesday night, so fed up with Washington gridlock that we have longed for someone to show up and throw the rascals out. Most of us are praying for our leaders and the country, hoping for unity where there is such division. Then some of us just came to see a child get baptized! With the great uncertainty in the nation, our time is not so different from another time, “In the year that King Uzziah died....”

We get this brief time-marker at the beginning of today’s call story for the prophet Isaiah. It’s worth remembering the year that King Uzziah died. He was a righteous ruler according to the biblical tradition. He reigned in the southern kingdom of Judah for an impressive five decades. As you might expect after so many years of one person’s leadership, Uzziah’s death set in motion a huge transition. Massive anxiety and social disruption were the order of the day. [According to preacher Scott Hoezee](#), “It was the year King Uzziah died. Or, it was the year President Kennedy died. Or it was the year 9/11 rattled the world to its core. It was the year when things fell apart, when foundations were shaken, when the markets crumbled, when all that had once been familiar now seemed long ago and far away.”

It was in *this* year that Isaiah had his life-changing vision. Imagine half of this sanctuary ceiling flipped back on a hinge as though it were a giant dollhouse, opening a vast window not to the sky but to heaven itself, with God Almighty right there. Isaiah tries to describe what he sees: a lofty throne disappearing in clouds of smoke, mighty seraphs surrounding the heavenly presence with their fluttering wings, and a deafening clamor of “holy, holy, holy” that knocks the temple doors off their hinges. Even the Jerusalem temple could not contain more than the lowest fringes of God’s robe.

Isaiah’s jaw drops and his heart falls through the floor. “I’m lost!” he cries, overwhelmed in awe and dread. “*I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips!*” We don’t know that Isaiah was a particularly sinful person. In fact, as a priest ministering in the temple Isaiah would have been pure, at least in the ritual sense. Yet in this close encounter of the divine kind, Isaiah knows the distance between human actions and holy commands. Being in the presence of Almighty God shows for certain what the apostle Paul writes later: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”. Yet instead of his heart stopping and life ending, Isaiah faces purification of a sort that will let him live on in a whole new way. A seraph comes with a live coal from the heavenly altar, too hot even for the supernatural creature

to handle without tongs. The coal touches Isaiah's mouth, and in the searing he hears the seraph offer absolution. "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Only then, only after the hot coal of divine purification, does Isaiah hear God ask, "Whom shall I send?" Then Isaiah responds in a way entirely different from the fearful awe that he's shown so far: "Here I am; send me!" His story reminds "people of the book" that it's only when we have confronted our failings, and been healed of our sinfulness, that we can hear the mission of God waiting for us. "Whom shall I send", God asks.

It's too early to say whether this election has called forth any new callings among us, any eager responses to be sent. It feels like we're still in the first part of this, the burning pain—am I right?? This has been the most bruising election in generations, and the demonic forces of fear linger. Since Tuesday, racist, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant speech and violence have been on the rise. Teachers from our church hear daily fear from children in their classrooms that their families will be broken up or their religion banned. [Maple Grove Senior High School officials confirmed](#) that the picture of a vandalized bathroom door going around social media was real. The graffiti on it included messages like "whites only", "white America" and "Trump Train". Bullying behavior at Edina High School has led some to fear for their safety and created a hostile climate for all students. Pro-Trump and anti-Trump people are beaten in the streets of our nation. We face the hot coals of ugliness, racism and fear of the stranger in America. Will being seared in this way lead to cleansing and bold new action, or only to more bitterness and callous behavior? Where do people of faith feature in the work of God going forward?

A few years ago, the Quaker author and speaker Parker Palmer wrote a book called *Healing the Heart of Democracy*. [In a column written afterward](#) he describes this insight from the book, using a wonderful Yiddish term. He says, "If I were asked for two words to summarize the habits of the heart citizens need to help democracy survive and thrive, I'd choose chutzpah and humility. By chutzpah I mean knowing that I have a voice that needs to be heard and the right to speak it. By humility I mean accepting the fact that my truth is always partial — and may not be true at all — so I need to listen with openness and respect, especially to 'the other.' Humility plus chutzpah equals the kind of citizens [that] democracy needs, and there is no reason — at least no good reason — why our number cannot be legion."

Isaiah shows us both humility and chutzpah in the presence of God for the good of the world. His immediate awareness of human sin causes him to shrink back in shame and unworthiness. He is like those of us who see the scorched earth of our civic life and are so dismayed that we cannot see ourselves participating at all going forward. Yet God does not let Isaiah remain in frozen fear. Once he is healed by the seraph's fiery coal, Isaiah hears God' calling, seeking someone to send with an urgent message. Then Isaiah demonstrates the chutzpah that changes the rest of his life and ministry. He steps up when God calls: "Here I am; send me!"

We are called in a similar way, even at such a challenging time as this in our public life. God invites us to hold together humility and chutzpah as we continue to seek God's realm of peace, justice and love, on earth as it is in heaven. Humility leads us to listen with curiosity rather than hostility when we encounter ideas that contradict our own desires or election outcomes. We may be surprised to learn that someone else's concerns are the same as ours, even if they come out in a different way. At the same time, chutzpah helps us lean in to more challenging conversations, not shying away when we must offer a bold, protective word against corrosive and hateful speech or behavior. Humility and chutzpah are gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church for this time, as we seek to build anew a beloved community for all God's people, "no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey".

Let me close with a specific invitation to use these two skills in the church over the coming days. This week, we launch a two-month "conversation drive" at Edina Morningside Church, beginning with a Conversation Training tomorrow night. The training will be led by myself and Laura Johnson, an organizer with the faith-based group [ISAIAH](#), who has successfully led such "in-reach" drives in other

congregations. We will learn to have transformational, enriching conversations, connecting with other people below the surface chit-chat of weather or sports. We'll see modeled and practice with each other humble listening and daring conversation. We'll also receive a list of 5-6 different members and friends of the church to seek an in-depth conversation with over the next two months. After the drive is done, we'll invite the whole church together to hear how the conversations went, and what we have learned about our community. Will you consider joining in the training tomorrow night? You can indicate your interest on the Time and Talent form. Will you seek to really know others you do not know already, and be known by them? Will you say yes when someone approaches you to have an uncommonly deep conversation?

Part of what makes church different from other public and social spaces is our belief in each person as a child of God, and our desire to follow Jesus in caring for the deep struggles and joys of life. Amid all the other things going on in the church and our world, this is how we practice humility and chutzpah with one another, building up the community of hope and connection for all that the next year will bring. That's a follow-up to the election we could all get behind!

Let us pray: *"O God of heaven and earth, as you cleansed Isaiah with a coal of fire to prepare him for proclaiming your word to the world, prepare us, so that we may know your bidding and carry out our callings with humility and chutzpah, in Jesus' name. Amen."*