

McCabe United Methodist Church  
"At Your Own Risk"  
Isaiah 6:1-8  
by Pastor Gary Walters

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from Isaiah Chapter 6:1-8. "In the year that King Uzziah died, I had a vision of the Lord. He was on his throne high above and his robe filled the temple. Flaming creatures with six wings each were flying over him and they covered their faces with two of their wings and their bodies with two more and they used the other two wings for flying as they shouted 'holy, holy, holy is the lord God almighty, the earth is filled with your glory' and as they shouted the door posts of the temple shook and the temple was filled with smoke. Then I cried out 'I am doomed.' Everything I say is sinful and so are the words of everyone around me, yet I have seen the King, the Lord all powerful. One of the flaming creatures flew over to me with a burning coal that it had taken from the alter with a pair of metal tongs and it touched my lips with a hot coal and said 'this has touched your lips, your sins are forgiven and you are no longer guilty.' After this I heard the Lord ask, 'Is there anyone I can send, will someone go for us.' 'I'll go I answered, send me.'" The word of God for the people of God, Thanks be to God!

Well we have all seen the "at your own risk" signs. I've seen them on objects, or events, as diverse as the side of the ticket counter where you get your ticket to go skiing, or I've also seen it at the ball pit at McDonalds, so we kind of take them for what they are worth. Sometimes we know that the activity we are engaging in is more dangerous than others; I'm not sure why it's on the ball pit, who knows, but skiing, that makes sense, after all you're strapping boards on your feet and sliding down an icy hill as fast as you can stand, so it makes sense. We understand that we are assuming a risk when we go about different activities. But, in our day and age of litigation, there are times and places where people get hurt and then they decide that someone else is responsible for their actions. So, there you have it.

But, I wonder if we should have "at your own risk" signs posted above the door to the sanctuary. Why? why is a good question and we are going to talk about that, but as we look at this passage in Isaiah, you might get a glimpse of this. It is a little bit along the lines of a conversation that takes place between some characters in one of C. S. Lewis' books in his series "The Chronicles of Narnia" and in the book "The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe" Lucy and Susan, the two Pevensie girls, or the main characters in several of the books, are about to meet Aslan for the first time. And Aslan is this fierce lion but he is also the Christ figure in the story. So, the beavers, (the animals talk in this book series), are having this conversation and they are kind of preparing them for this meeting. The conversation goes like this "Is he safe", Susan asked. "I shall feel very nervous about meeting a lion." "at you will dear, said Mrs. Beaver, and make no mistake, if there was anyone who could appear before Aslan without their knees knocking they are either braver than most or just else plain silly." "Then he isn't safe?" said Lucy. "Safe" said Mr. Beaver, "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you, who said anything about safe, of course he isn't safe, but he is good." Of course he isn't safe, but he is good.

Well Isaiah was a priest so he had entered the temple how many hundreds, maybe even thousands of times before and yet on this occasion he saw what we seldom do. He experienced, or recognized, what we seldom see when we enter the sanctuary. That, indeed it is not safe, that the "at your own risk" sign maybe should be above the door to the temple or to the sanctuary. Not because the church or the temple was so dangerous in and of itself, but because we were entering into a time and a place where God is supposed to be more evident, more tangible, more real and that God indeed is not safe.

In this passage we definitely get that picture or that image. Isaiah sets it up wonderfully. He starts by giving a little bit of context, but also it provides an interesting contrast. He says in the year that King Uzziah died. You have to understand that Uzziah was a great king. He was an able administrator, he was a brilliant general and he had a heart after God. Under his leadership Israel prospered in every way. At the time King Uzziah was dying, on the horizon was the fact that Assyria was coming into power once again and was slowly chipping away or conquering and taking over the nations on the other side of the Jordan and they knew this was coming, and so the fact that they lose Uzziah at this crucial time in the history and the political ebb and flow of the ancient Near East, they're terrified and this is the context into which Isaiah has this incredible vision. So he goes up to the temple to worship and it's as if the veil that separated the holy of holies, where the ark of the covenant sat, is gone. It's as if the outer walls of the temple are not there, that the separation between the people and God has simply vanished and where the holy of holies would sit there is now a throne and enthroned upon that seat is God, sitting there as King of Israel.

If ever Israel needed a king who could be king it was now, considering all they were about to face, but God assures them that no matter how great your king might be, not matter how able of a general, it is the God most high who will defend and keep and protect you.

As Isaiah beholds this scene, it's interesting that he gets no further than the hem of God's robe. His robes, his presence, fills the temple, but Isaiah gets no further than that hem as if to say there simply are not words, that words could not describe the experience, the splendor, the majesty, the holiness of God and so he simply stops there.

Well as Laura said in her children's message, "holy, holy, holy, God is the holiest," nothing could be more holy than God. In the ancient Near East, holiness has the same idea that we have in terms of being set apart for God but their pantheon of gods it didn't necessarily carry with it the idea of a moral obligation that we connect with that idea of holiness. It was because of who God is and his character that we have that association. But in the ancient Near East it was a new deal, it was a big deal, that God connected not just ceremonial cleanliness in terms of how you wash your hands and what you eat with holiness, the other gods had that or did that. But Yahweh connected how we treat one another, that ethical behavior, that love for our brothers and sisters, our fellow human beings, with our devotion to God. He is the one who gave the law that crafted and shaped that whole concept of "I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper," that I am obligated in my service to God to treat others as I want to be treated. Well, that's kind of an aside, but that's what holiness means here.

As these creatures, these flaming creatures, the seraphim sing back and forth, "holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God almighty", or the Lord all powerful, as the CVE phrases it, the temple shook so that even the door frames rattled. It would be kind of fun to worship like that wouldn't it. I was in a black pentecostal church that worshiped like that on occasion. We don't get that spirit too often; although it might do us some good, but this is moreso. This is shaking the very foundations of the temple. With the splendor and the display of glory and holiness that Isaiah beholds, he throws himself down and declares "I'm doomed", I'm finished. Because everyone new in the ancient Near East that the holiness of God could not tolerate the unholiness of people and beholding the extent of God's holiness and his glory, Isaiah recognized in himself how much he was not that. And in that recognition, he doesn't cry out for mercy, he doesn't cry out to God to be spared, he simply knows, I've had it, I've beheld the glory of God and so I'm finished. But, God extends this grace to Isaiah. He sends one of the seraphim over who touches his lips with a hot coal, symbolizing, I don't think it was literal, but I think it was symbolic

that God laid his grace upon Isaiah and cleansed him. When we talk about the coal touching his lips, it represented the words of his mouth, really the actions, the attitudes of his life and so God is cleansing his entire life.

Then there is this shift. Up until now it has been talking about what Isaiah has beheld, but now it kind of switches to Isaiah overhearing this conversation that's going on between God and the seraphim that surround him on the throne. God asks, "Is there anyone whom I can send, will someone go for us." And Isaiah says "I will, I'll go, send me." Although the way it's phrased the connotation is more like, not this presumption of ooh, pick me, pick me, but it's a more humble approach that Isaiah says will I do, I'm willing.

There is an interesting progression to this whole passage. It's the context of King Uzziah dying that opens up the context or the possibility for this vision in the first place. It's this vision of God's holiness that brings Isaiah to this place where he recognizes how much his holiness falls short. That it's not that Isaiah was such a hellion, this is the best that Israel had to offer, but in comparison to God he recognized how short he fell. There is this repentance, there is this confession and because of this despair, God can bring to Isaiah a cleansing, touching him with his hand, and by the cleansing opens the possibility for Isaiah to serve, to be the one that God will send to the nation of Israel to proclaim his word in this crucial time in their history.

Well, that whole context just kind of sets the stage. There is a lot we could talk about here, that whole progression, we could spend weeks discussing. But, as I look at Isaiah's response, his eagerness to respond to the grace of God and the vision of holiness that he has seen, I'm challenged, because I'm not always that eager to serve or that willing to serve. I don't want God to disturb my comfortable routine and my well-practiced habits. So I respond in very measured ways. It occurs to me that those who need to be coerced, or those who need to feel that pressure to serve God, perhaps are too little aware of the immensity of his holiness and the grace that he has extended. So then I think perhaps I do not yet appreciate, I have not yet beheld the holiness of God to the extent which I need to. And because I haven't held his holiness to that extent, I don't appreciate the amount of grace that he has extended to me. And because I don't understand, or appreciate the amount of grace he has extended to me, I am slow of heart to serve and to respond to him.

But, I'm not just talking about myself. I don't need to put you in my shoes, I'm guessing that all of us have something of that experience at times. So, the questions that begs is, have you, have we, have I, exchanged this God of holiness, who is not safe, who is an "enter at your own risk" kind of a God, have we exchanged that kind of holiness and glory for a safe, domesticated version, that will fit easily into our lives, that will put a Jesus seal on what we already want to do and how we want to be. Or, will we let the holiness of God challenge us to the very core. That he might step into our routines and our habits and change the way that we live. Change the way that we treat our spouses or our siblings or our children or our coworkers or our classmates, and all those that we come in contact with. Have we experienced God's holiness enough to appreciate the extent of his grace, how great is his grace to us, that we could stand in his presence, that we could come into this place and presume to enter into his presence. We can, because he has extended that grace. But, if we don't appreciate the magnitude of his holiness, we will cheapen that grace and we will not appreciate the full extent of what it is he has done for us. So my prayer this morning is that we would all get some glimpse of the holiness, the majesty, the power of God, so that we could fully understand and appreciate his grace to us and that we might say, "Lord will I do, here I am, have me", because this is an "enter at your own risk" kind of an event, whether the sign is above the door or not, so let us pray together.

Lord, we thank you that you have extended your grace, but help us never, never take it for granted. Help us to see the extent of your holiness, your love, your power, that we would never presume upon your grace, but that we would come here gratefully, fully appreciating the extent of your love and grace to us, in Jesus' name we pray, Amen.