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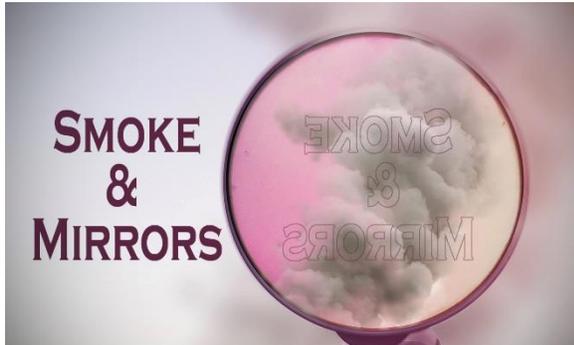
Title: Smoke and Mirrors

Date: May 26 & 27, 2018

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Text: [Isaiah 6:1-13](#)

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Last week, the Spirit of Pentecost whooshed in with tongues of fire, sounding like a violent rushing wind. The Spirit of God landed on the Disciples of Christ, breaking down walls and borders between people. The Spirit came to build up the kin-dom by empowering others to listen to those with whom we disagree, accept others'

differences, and to practice a life without fear but with faith and love for all. As Randy preached last week, the Holy Spirit came with wind and fire, and nothing would be the same.

Today, we experience God not with wind and fire but with shaking and smoke that filled the whole room. God showed up in a BIG way in Isaiah's vision. Let's hear the first part of today's reading.

"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." (Isaiah 6:1-4)

The whole earth is filled with God's glory! God is so majestic, sitting on a throne, and attended to by winged creatures flying and claiming God's vast holiness! God is the Holy Other, magnificent, incomprehensible, greater than anything in the world. So much so that no one is able to see God's face. And yet, Isaiah sees more of God than even Moses. Moses experienced God in the fire of the burning bush and saw the back of God. Isaiah saw God from the waist down, the huge robe, a symbol of kingship, which is important. God couldn't be seen, which is "outside the scope of normal human experience," and yet, the image of God is planted in the midst of human history, in about the 8th century BCE.¹

The text begins by setting Isaiah's vision of God in the historical context that King Uzziah had died. King Uzziah had brought stability to the nation of Judah and was admired for enhancing the kingdom's agriculture with new walls and watchtowers in the wilderness, and he built up the army.² His death signaled the end of relative independence for Judah. He was a good king, but he was no God. God is unimaginable and incredible, far removed from reality and yet very much concerned with the lives of God's children. And so God comes a calling to Isaiah.

This is his response:

"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!" (Isaiah 6:5

This is very similar to the calls of many of the prophets of the Old Testament. Like Isaiah, who can't quite comprehend what is happening and why he is being called into service by God, Moses also protested. So did Gideon, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, etc. Their resistance to the call to be God's spokesperson has less to do with their own stuff on its own, but in the mirror of God, they saw their own frailties, their own brokenness. They felt unworthy to be in the presence of such an AWESOME God.³

Isaiah's reflection in the Divine mirror exposes his own sins as well as the sins of those in his own country. He knew that he was part of a culture who had forgotten and forsaken the Lord, whose worship was useless, whose leaders were corrupt, and whose greed led to injustice.⁴ Perhaps, the people of Judah's problem was not that they grasped too much of God, but they experienced too little of God.⁵ God was set to change all that...again.

God had previously called prophets to preach a prophetic word, to warn about what would happen if they continued to do as they have always done, to keep the status quo. But the people of Israel had a hard time hearing the good news that comes from hard words of instruction.

They didn't listen to the prophets before, so God showed up to Isaiah. God was aware of the situation, and if things didn't change, the world would be devastated by violence. Isaiah would be the one to carry the message. But he had to accept the role first. And before he could do that, he had to be forgiven.

The text continues: *"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!'" (Isaiah 6:6-8)

In just a few moments, Isaiah went from experiencing the Divine in such an indescribable way that he was full of awe and fear, to reflecting on his own self-doubt and the sins of his people, to being ritually purified, to volunteer for the job God called him to do. What a rush?! Not just the shaking and the smoke, but the emotional highs and lows of being in the presence of God who chose *him* to go for God.

It reminds me of the old rabbinic saying from Hasidic Rabbi Bunem of Poland. He said, *"Everyone must have two pockets, with a note in each pocket, so that he or she can reach into the one or the other, depending on the need. When feeling lowly and depressed, discouraged or disconsolate, one should reach into the right pocket, and, there, find the words: 'For my sake was the world created.' But when feeling high and mighty one should reach into the left pocket, and find the words: 'I am but dust and ashes.'"*⁶

Isaiah was definitely not feeling too big for his britches when he encountered God in the temple. He felt unworthy and even mournful to be in God's sight. He clearly understood that he was a sinner, mortal, dust, and ashes, that he was not God. God was the one who had to remind Isaiah, that indeed, he was called into the service of the One in whose image he is made, for whose sake the world was created. God's willingness to blot out the sin of the called suggests that God is ready to forgive others just as quickly.

For what does this passage have to do with us? Well, remember on Pentecost, the Spirit of the Lord landed on all who were gathered. We are the gathered today, and the Spirit is still moving and shaking, lighting fires, sending smoke signals to us right here, right now. Who are we to hear the voice of God? Well, we, too, are made in the image of God for whom the world was created. We look into the Divine mirror to see what we reflect.

And what do we see? We see, that we too are people of unclean lips, who live in a culture that is marred by fear, unfaithfulness, corruption, greed, and violence. We participate in the sins of placing our allegiances in stuff over the Sacred. To be in the presence of the Creator, we are aware that as the created, we live in a culture that is destroying creation. We have more people in poverty now than we did 50 years ago, and we are funding fewer programs to address it.

We divide ourselves into us and them. We would rather *win OVER* others than *win over* others with our love.⁷ We sort ourselves into categories of winners and losers, forgetting that there are no "other people", that we are

all on the same team, as children of God. We sin by our silence in the face of suffering, in cultural and personal ways not unfamiliar to those of the times in which today's text was written. We continue to make the same mistakes as the Israelites and Judeans. And we seem to be okay with that. "We are prone to complacency." Theologian Walter Brueggeman "notes the inclination of religious people, faithful people, to arrange our lives as best we can, to keep [God's] holiness at bay, with our pieties, our doctrines, our liturgies, our moralities, our secret ideologies, safe virtuous, settled."⁸ God doesn't want us to just face and name our sins. God wants us to do something about them!⁹

Does all of that seem a little daunting and a little or a lot harsh? It is. But that's the rest of the story of Isaiah that we haven't heard yet. So here it is: *"And he [God] said, 'Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed.' Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said: 'Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land. Even if a tenth part remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled.' The holy seed is its stump.'" (Isaiah 6:9-13)*

When he said, "Here I am!," Isaiah had no idea that the task he would be given was to preach God's judgment to his people. He was supposed to bring a harsh word that would *eventually* lead to hope and healing. In essence, he would mirror back to them what they had not understood, that they were sinning in the eyes of the Lord, and they needed to stop it! Isaiah was thrust into the position, the vocation (from the Latin "to call"), to tell them what they had been unable to grasp on their own. This was no easy task, and totally unpleasant. But I have said it before, and I will say it again, the role of a prophet, the role of a person of faith, is not to be comfortable, but to be challenged into change.

Lao Tzu says, "When I let go of what I am, I become what I might be." That's what transformation of self and the world looks like. And we all have a role to play!

Trappist Monk Thomas Merton wrote that "For each one of us, there is only one thing necessary: to fulfill our own destiny, according to God's will, to be what God wants us to be." Who I am, and to which vocation I am called, is different from each of yours. But make no mistake, each one of us is called in some way to be God hands and feet and voice in this world.

We, too, are called to participate in the healing of our neighbors, this nation, the world. God is so great, more than we can imagine, yet God chose and chooses to work through humans, mortal creatures who constantly mess up. God is mighty and powerful, but vulnerable, too.

In the very next chapter, Isaiah is given the words of hope that Immanuel, "God with us," will be born a baby as a sign of Good News. And later, "a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots."

God is both Holy Other, majestic beyond belief, and yet With Us here and now rooted in our history, beckoning forth new life, calling up new prophets to speak out in the face of injustice and violence and stand up for those lost to the shadows. That's me. That's you. That's all of us.

To paraphrase Bishop Michael Curry's sermon from the Royal Wedding last week, when we answer the call of God, to be unselfish and sacrificial, we can change the world. By mirroring God, our homes and families and neighborhoods and communities and governments and nations and commerce and business would reflect love. No child would go to bed hungry in such a world as that. Justice would roll down like a mighty stream in a world like that. Poverty and school shootings will become history in a world like that. The earth (AND SCHOOLS) would become the sanctuar[ies] they were meant to be in a world that. We will lay down our swords and shields down by the riverside to study war no more...when we pick up God's mirror and truly reflect the Divine that is Outstanding and the Divine that is within.

Justice and peace don't just happen by the smoke and mirrors of magic. The kin-dom of God is made manifest, present here on earth, by the smoke of Holy Spirit and the mirror of the Creator in whose image we are created and called to care. Smoke and mirrors happen to be the grace of God, showing us what was, what is, and what could be, when we all live up to the reflection of the One who redeems, renews, and readies us to answer "Here I am!"

¹ Melinda Quivik, WorkingPreacher.com

² Ibid.

³ Preaching Year B, p. 287

⁴ Patricia Tull, WorkingPreacher.com

⁵ Rev. Mark J. Suriano quoting Henry G. Binton, ucc.org

⁶ Rabbi Simcha Bunem of Pershyscha

⁷ Pulpit Fiction

⁸ Brueggeman as quoted in ucc.org

⁹ Ministry Matters on David Emery