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Isaiah 6:1-8

Holy, Holy Holy

I don't know if you would agree with me. In life, I think it's important to shake things up every now and then. There's a tendency to get stuck in routines and well-worn patterns. Many of us watch the same television shows over and over. We go to bed at the same time every night. We go to the same grocery store, walk down the same aisles, and put the same foods in our carriage.

I have a rotation going, in terms of my green vegetables. I tend to cycle through these three: broccoli, brussels sprouts, and asparagus. I'm probably missing out by not experimenting with leeks or swiss chard, but I tend to stick with my big three. I'm comfortable with them, so I tend not to branch out.

I actually think getting into ruts and routines can be particularly detrimental in the spiritual life. Things are a little different now because of the pandemic, but think about a typical Sunday morning worship experience. You go to church. You head to the same parking space where you always park. You sit in the same pew that you sit in every Sunday. You talk to the same people you always talk to.

The order of worship is basically the same every week. Nobody is going to say anything radical from the pulpit, which is how we like it. It's been said preachers only have a few sermons. We just say the same things over and over in different ways.

Now, don't get me wrong. I've grown to appreciate routine. I understand the value of the comfortable and the familiar. In a church I served previously, there was a gentleman whose wife died a number of years ago. He sat in the same pew every Sunday, because that was the pew where he and his wife sat together every Sunday. For him, that pew was a connection. So, I get why we develop habits and routines.

My own routines keep me on track in important ways, but I do recognize there can be a downside. If we never stretch beyond our comfort zone or veer from the routine, it's easy to become complacent. We might miss opportunities to see things from a different perspective. We miss out on new and different experiences from which we can grow and find enjoyment.

Recently, I came across this writing from a work of 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish literature. It reads, "Just as the hand, held before the eye, can hide the tallest mountain, so the routine of everyday life can keep us from seeing the vast radiance and the secret wonders that fill the world."

Our story from the prophet Isaiah, takes place at a time when the nation of Israel got a little too comfortable. Under the leadership of King Uzziah, Israel experienced good fortune. They prospered financially, but with that prosperity came religious complacency and spiritual malaise.

The more comfortable they got, the less they prioritized God. When they worshipped, it lacked a certain fervor. Their heart wasn't in it. They stopped caring about the things God cared about. Isaiah's first five chapters describe Israel's lack of concern for justice and righteousness. As prosperous as they were, they neglected the most vulnerable in society, the widows and orphans.

King Uzziah's reign lasted a long time and he accomplished great things, but God wasn't pleased. The people got a little too comfortable and a little too complacent. The evidence suggests that Isaiah himself fell into the same trap. He had access to King Uzziah and a voice in national affairs. So, when Isaiah pointed out the corruption among the nation's leaders, he was among them, until the day his life changed.

One day, Isaiah had a vision. He wrote, "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." Until this time, Isaiah may have focused on King Uzziah sitting on the throne. In the year King Uzziah died, suddenly, Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne.

If Isaiah had gotten a little too comfortable and a little too complacent, that came to a sudden halt as he stood in God's presence. The hem of God's robe filled the temple. That's a way of describing God's grandeur. Seraphs, supernatural beings, each with six wings, were in attendance. They screamed so loudly, it shook the foundations.

Isaiah experienced the holiness of God. The seraphs called out, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And what happened to Isaiah upon encountering God's holiness? It changed him. It changed the direction of his life. First, he became aware of his own unworthiness.

He confessed, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." That's a metaphor for speech and its misuse. In this age of misinformation, and conspiracy theories, when it's hard to even tell what is true anymore, the thing Isaiah confessed when encountering God was the misuse of speech. I have a friend who is fond of saying, "Sometimes we get so far from the truth, it's hard to find our way back."

But that's not the only concern of Isaiah. It was believed God was so holy, no human could see God and live. That's why the seraphs used two of their wings to cover their faces. Here's a way to think of God's holiness. Think of the sun. The sun is the center of the universe. Without the sun we wouldn't be here. It makes life, itself, possible.

However, as we who spend time at the beach know, if you get too much, it will burn. It's not that the sun is bad. It's not that it has bad intentions. It's just that it is so intense we can only handle a little at a time. We might think of God's holiness in that way. We can encounter the divine and have a relationship with it, but not all of it, not all at once.

Isaiah was spared. A seraph touched his lips with a hot coal. That represents purification and the blotting out of his sin. That meant Isaiah was ready. Having been jolted out of his complacency, having confessed and receiving forgiveness, he was ready for a new path.

His life would take on a new purpose. God needed a spokesperson. God needed someone to deliver a difficult message to the nation of Israel. God needed someone prepared to speak the truth. When the Lord asked, "Who will go for us?" Isaiah responded, "Here am I; send me." He went from being a man of unclean lips to become Israel's greatest prophet.

I think Isaiah's transformation is an indication that the holiness of God brings about the soul's rejuvenation and spiritual renewal. Don't we all need that? Aren't there times when we all get a little too comfortable, when we get a little complacent when it comes to faith and caring about the things God cares about?

Now, I know what you're thinking. Isaiah had this amazing personal encounter with God in the temple. That never happens to me. That's true, but remember the text says, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." That means we don't have to have the kind of dramatic encounter Isaiah had. We can encounter God's glory and holiness anywhere. The whole earth is full of God's glory. You just have to be open to it.

There's an old legend about St. Francis of Assisi. "One day, while doing a walking meditation in his garden, St. Francis saw a bare almond tree. He approached the almond tree and asked it to tell him about God. Suddenly the tree was covered with blossoms. If blossoming trees are an indication of God's glory, we're surrounded. In my yard, it is the rhododendron and the lilac. "The whole earth is full of God's glory." You just have to notice it and take it in.

I was thinking about why it is that people come to York from all over New England. Crowds of people step away from their familiar surroundings and their daily routines. They come here to be rejuvenated. And we live here. We're surrounded by God's glory: the ocean, the rivers, the wildlife, this church. If we're not on fire for all of this, then we might need to step away from our familiar habits and patterns. Holy, holy, holy...the whole earth is full of God's glory.

In the presence of God's holiness, Isaiah changed. He went from being a man of unclean lips to Israel's greatest prophet. He found renewed purpose. He became bold. His values aligned with God's values. The good news is that the whole earth is full of God's glory. It's all around us. Do you see it? God loves us just the way we are, but God isn't going to leave us the way we are.