

# “Here I Am, Lord”

John 3:1-17; Isaiah 6:1-8

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In the early summer of 2018 I got to attend the Annual Festival of Homiletics conference in Washington D.C. This was the passage that was preached on the first night of the conference in the National Cathedral. If you’ve never been to the National Cathedral it is truly enormous. I sat there looking up at the huge vaulted arched stonework ceiling and as this passage was read I imagined the hem of a gigantic cloak filling the sanctuary space. In my own imagining I did not imagine seeing the full glory of God as Isaiah describes, but just that hem- a hint of the glory not seen. I think my brain could not put into vision what Isaiah describes as the glory of God.

It is a common assumption within the Hebrew Scriptures that if you see God you will die. As if to witness the full glory of God as Isaiah sees in his vision would simply be too much for the human being to handle and the result would be sudden death. Although I can’t bring to mind a single story where someone dies because of seeing God this assumption comes through in the stories of those in the Hebrew Scriptures who see God and do not die. Even Moses who asks God directly to see God is told by God that he cannot see God’s face because no human being shall see God and live.

With this background consider the magnitude of what is being said here, “In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord”

One might expect in these circumstances for Isaiah to be ecstatic, excited, joyful. He is witnessing the unwitnessable. But in the midst of his awe, Isaiah despairs, “Woe is me! I am lost” For Isaiah, seeing the LORD is not only a revelation of the divine, but also a revealing of his own failures, his own

sinfulness. His encounter with God immediately prompts him to look inward and he is not satisfied by what he finds there.

When I began to plan for worship today, I read the passage and was struck by the way that feeling of unworthiness on Isaiah's part was a barrier that had to be removed before he could respond to God's call with that bold declaration "Here I am, send me". I thought I as going to preach a sermon about how our feelings of guilt prevent us from engaging in the work of the church and keep us saying things like "that's work for someone much *better* than me" But as I lived with this passage this week, I thought a lot about guilt and about shame.

First, it's worth asking the question why Isaiah feels such guilt. The first 5 chapters of Isaiah indicate that the Israelites have failed to live into their values as God's people. In chapter 1 God pleads, "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." It is perhaps his own part in failing to live in to the values outlined in that passage that Isaiah says "Woe is me".

Second, notice that Isaiah doesn't even hear God's call "Whom shall I send?" until after that coal touches his lips and the seraph declares that his guilt has departed and his sin is blotted out. Rather than guilt as a barrier to responding to God, Isaiah's guilt is more of a doorway that he must pass through and experience before he is even able to hear God calling.

The message I thought I would preach today was about releasing our guilt, letting it go, getting rid of it so that we could hear God calling us. Instead, in wrestling with the Scripture, I've come to believe that our guilt is not what's getting in the way. It is not a barrier, but a doorway. In other words, I believe that guilt is unpleasant, but helpful for our Spiritual growth.

Brene Brown's work on guilt and on shame and the difference between the two has been really helpful to me in understanding this. If you're unfamiliar with Brene Brown, she is a researcher who focuses on vulnerability, courage, shame, and empathy and has written many accessible and helpful books. Through her research she has identified an important distinction between Shame and Guilt.

In an article on her blog she writes this: "I believe that guilt is adaptive and helpful—it's holding something we've done or failed to do up against our values and feeling psychological discomfort.

I define shame as the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging—something we've experienced, done, or failed to do makes us unworthy of connection.”

In my own words, I would say that guilt is about our actions, it's about what we do. Shame is about what we believe about our essential person, our identity and belonging.

Shame is not a doorway. Shame moves us toward fear, isolation and can lead us into destructive behavior that harms ourselves or others. It truly is a barrier. But, by contrast engaging meaningfully without guilt moves us toward courage; the courage to hear God calling us and to respond.

Shame is what occurs when we refuse to pass through the door of our guilt. When we are unwilling to hold our actions or inactions up against our values for examination- perhaps because we are afraid of what we might find. Perhaps because we already know in some deep recess of our hearts that we are not living in to our values.

All of us, from time to time are prone to avoid the discomfort of guilt, turn a blind eye, or make excuses for ourselves, but our faith and our practice build in times of facing that guilt to help us deepen our connection to ourselves, each other, and especially to God.

Our worship service follows the same framework as Isaiah's experience of God in our passage. We begin with a call to worship and hymn, a recognition that God is present in our lives, in this place, and in this community and from there we immediately are moved to our prayer of confession, an opportunity for us to open our hearts, examine ourselves in the presence of God and pass through the door.

Like Isaiah, we are assured that we are forgiven, though for us it is not a hot coal, but the waters of baptism that put a seal on that forgiveness and remind us that we, though we have made mistakes, are beloved children of God.

It is only after that, that we are able to have open ears, and hearts and minds to hear what God might be saying to us today through Scripture and reflecting on it.

Then we are called to respond to that call, before being sent out into the world.

And so before we respond to whatever God has moved in your heart this morning, these are my hopes for all of you.

- May the story of Isaiah fortify you with the courage to examine yourself before God in all humility, and honesty, and vulnerability so that you grow in relationship with God each day.
- On the days when you are afraid to pass through the door of your own guilt, and there will be those days, remember that you have this community, and this safe and loving space where we confess together both our own sins and the sins we share collectively as a society. You are not alone.

Most importantly having passed through the door of our own guilt I pray that this church will remember that despite our failures and mistakes we are beloved children of God, loved more deeply than we could ever know. May we have the audacity to believe that God is calling us- in this day and age- to be ambassadors for Christ; to live for justice, to care for the oppressed, to support the orphan and the widow in our own midst. And although, like Isaiah, we will find the call difficult and frustrating and hard, may we have the courage and the Trust to respond Here I Am, Here we Are, Send us!