

A Live Coal

By Rev. Todd Farnsworth

Isaiah 6: 1-7



In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered

their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." 4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. 5 "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Today begins our summer series of sermons based on the windows here at the Briarcliff Congregational Church. Karen Sharman, the author of *Glory in Glass*, a deacon, and faithful member of our choir has been working with me to produce a weekly peek at our windows. Each Wednesday(ish) we'll release a 15-minute video that will give you a closer look at our windows and the history behind them. In case you didn't check out the link on our website or in the Friday Blast, this week we explored The Rose Window. Michael, could you put up that slide?

Ah, there it is.

Our text today begins: *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying.* It was a politically tumultuous time. The transfer of power from one king to another was wrought with uncertainty, even violence, and during the time around 742-745 BCE God's community was experiencing this shifting sand under their feet. Assyria (feel free to BOOOO) was coming into power and Judah/the people who worshiped YHWH were in peril of being overthrown. In fact, through most of the prophet Isaiah's life Judah was unstable. In today's text, Isaiah is called to speak God's truth into this time of uncertainty.

As we look at our Rose Window we are drawn into the story. If you were in the sanctuary you would see the organ pipes below and the sanctuary tumbling forth from the Rose Window, much like the folds of God's robes. In the window you'd see the seraphim with six wings. Each of the seraphim is visible through a keyhole, and the seraphim represent different races, different nationalities and different ethnicities. It is a tribute to the vision of



artist, Vivienne Gardner (from Woodhaven Studios in Bermuda) that our angels are so diverse!

Like Isaiah's angels (not to be confused with Charlie's Angels who

were private detectives in the 70's and 80's) our celestial messengers evoke the words Isaiah experienced: *"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."* The seraphim call to each other. It's a prayer, it's a proclamation. It is an amazing announcement of God's glory in the midst of the calamity God's people are experiencing. Oh, to hear those words today and to be reminded of the long arms of God's presence! It's enough to shake one to the core...which is how Isaiah receives the announcement.

Isaiah cries out: *"Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty."* In ancient times it is considered too much to look upon God's glory. If you ever saw the original Indiana Jones movie, you might remember what happened to those who looked directly into the face of God when the ark was opened. Spoiler alert, it wasn't pretty! And Isaiah, despite being a pretty good guy, a priest who tries to do the right thing, knows that before God, his silent sins are exposed. The things he alone is aware of are laid bare. Even the things he has said and done out of ignorance are on display before the Holy, and he shudders in shame crying out, *Woe to me! I am ruined!* It is a very primal prayer of confession. It is a reckoning with his human frailty before God. It is a cry for help and mercy because Isaiah knows, he can't fix things by himself.

Have you ever had that awareness before God? Last Sunday I spoke at the Family Friendly Rally against Racism in Chillmark Park. What I said was not terribly important compared to the speakers who were black.

The first speaker was a young DJ from the area who told about how, while eating his lunch at a train station in Chappaqua, he was questioned because a white woman had seen him talking with some children (who recognized him as the cool DJ they had at their parties). The speaker described having to surrender his license to the police officer and being asked humiliating questions that assumed his guilt based on the color of his skin.

The second speaker (who was also black) described heading to work at Club Fit. He told about bopping along to gospel music in his car and how as he passed a police car, the officer began following him and eventually, pulled him over in the Club Fit parking lot. He was questioned as to why he was there, what he was up to, and questions that I have never been asked when I have been pulled over for speeding. This speaker told us that as a father, he worries about his children growing up under such surveillance. He mourns that because of the color of their skin they will not be able to drive around our community without having to watch their every step. He cried as he described praying for them each night as he put them to bed, hoping that the next day they would be safe. Hoping that the next day they be able to walk the fraught gauntlet of being black in a mostly white community.

I thought a lot about those stories this week. As a dad, I can't say that I ever worried about those issues for my white children as I tucked them into bed. I thought about the burden black children carry, and I was sent a list of

things said about white people and black people that highlighted some differences between how we speak about folks.

The list noted that:

White people on welfare are described as poor.

Black people on welfare are described as lazy.

White people can't find a job because of a bad economy.

Black people can't find a job because they are dependent on aid.

White people who destroy property after a baseball game are described as "rowdy"

Black people who destroy property after another black person is murdered are described as "savages"

You probably get the idea, and you could probably add to this list of disparity so that when you look up at the angels in our window and they start calling "*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory*" you may join me in shaking in your boots with shame before the Lord. You may join me in confessing that I am not worthy to be in God's presence for how I have thought about and spoke about and acted about people of color. You may join Isaiah in saying: "*Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a person of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.*"

The guilt Isaiah experienced was not only a guilt wrought by sinful thoughts, but from sinful deeds...and not only his deeds, but he recognized the deeds of his countrymen. It was a personal and communal confession.

I suppose we might see our confessions that way, too.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." It's as if one of these beautiful creatures flew out of our window and touched our lips with a live coal from one of the candles burning upfront in the chancel (ouch!), and reassured us that we could do better with God's help. It's as if the angels came to us and physically shut us up for a bit while we felt the pain of the hot embers on our lips, and called us to listen...and learn...and eventually, do better for God's sake with our sisters and brothers of color. The *spokesbeings* of the Lord don't want us to be stuck in our woe and guilt, but they have bigger plans for Isaiah...and I believe us, as they set Isaiah apart with this ritual. It is not unlike our ritual of baptism, where we are set apart as followers of Jesus, and therefore called upon to live a higher calling...to try and do better to love all of God's people as we have loved by God.

Let's look at the window one more time before I wrap this up.

Besides proclaiming the glory of God and calling us to recognize our place in the cosmos, *our* angels bear another message. In between them is a

dove. Karen notes in our video, that the dove is representative of the dove from Noah's ark, a symbol of peace. A symbol that God has given us a place to land. A symbol that we are good to move on with our lives.

It may be difficult to see from the pews, but here you can witness that our dove does not

have an olive branch in her talons. She has not found dry land yet. Peace is still just out of reach. There is work to be done in the ark.

We need to listen to our siblings who are black and hear about what Juneteenth means to them. We need to care about the toll being afraid of police takes in a person, on a community. We need to hear the horror filled stories of lynchings and systemic oppression that weigh on our siblings lives.

And we need to celebrate their achievements. Rejoice in their resilience. Ask for their trust as we become intentional allies in faith.

As Isaiah's lips healed he heard God describe how things would get worse before they would get better for the community of faith. He heard how he was to continually bring up the people's transgressions and that in their anger they would transgress some more. Isaiah is not called to immediately comfort the people. He is called to challenge them... perhaps we can challenge one another to stick with this mission!





He asks from his blistering lips: *How long?* And God replies, “until they have nothing to rely on but me. A holy seed in a stump.”

As we look at our Rose Window with the elusive promise of peace, I pray that we will not jump to an easy assurance of “all is well” in order to assuage our guilt.

There are stories to hear from our sisters and brothers of color.

There is work to be done so that all Dads can kiss their kids goodnight and have as their greatest worry whether we remembered to have them brush their teeth...or not.

Without justice and understanding, there can be no peace.

Let us heal together, in Jesus’ spirit. Amen.