

ONCE UPON A LIFETIME

Isaiah 6:1-8

One Wednesday night at Chicago Stadium, during a fan promotion at a Chicago Bulls-Miami Heat basketball game, a 23-year-old fan by the name of Don Calhoun had a once in a lifetime experience.

He was pulled from the bleachers to see if he could shoot a 79-foot shot launched from the opposite free throw line, three-quarters of the length of the basketball court. And Calhoun, who was picked from the crowd because he was wearing bright yellow shoes, hit “nothing but net” and earned himself one million dollars. (An interesting thing about the whole deal was that Calhoun was about to shoot the ball like a typical basketball set shot. But one of the cheerleaders told him it was best to throw it like a baseball, which is what he did.)

Calhoun’s boss reporting on the event said: “It couldn’t happen to a nicer guy.” His life has been quite affected by his good fortune. He reports of hearing from old friends that he hasn’t heard from in years.

Once in a lifetime. The prophet Isaiah had such an experience too. He didn’t shoot a 79-foot free throw. He didn’t win a million dollars. No, Isaiah’s one-in-a-lifetime experience was more profound than that. Isaiah saw the Lord!

In the 8th century BC, Isaiah and his people had lived through good times under the prosperous rule of King Uzziah. It was a period of peace and stability. The people felt affluent and secure. But suddenly King Uzziah died and everything changed. The people no longer knew what to expect. There was uncertainty about the future. There were threats of war. The way of life they had enjoyed for so long was coming to an end.

Now, fast forward: 8th Century BC to the 21st century AD – almost 3 millennia apart. And yet, we can identify with Isaiah and his contemporaries, can’t we? These first years of the twenty-first century are filled with uncertainty. Corporations are downsizing as jobs go overseas. The mortgage crisis threatens to sink us. The economy is in big trouble. Terrorism and threats of terrorism have erased our sense of invulnerability, and everything seems to be decaying right before our eyes! Old and sure

ways of the past don't seem to work any more; and promised new ways remain unproven. We want change; or do we? What are we to do in such stressful times?

Well, we can do the same thing Isaiah did. We can turn to God. In a time of uncertainty, Isaiah went to the temple to pray and to seek direction and comfort. There he experienced some things that you and I need to experience, too.

First of all, Isaiah experienced Holiness. As he was praying near the altar, he saw a vision that would literally change his life, In his mind's eye, he saw the Lord God "sitting on the throne high and lifted up". The vision was so vivid that he could see the train of God's robe filling the entire temple. There were winged creatures flying around crying "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The earth shook and the Temple filled with smoke.

Isaiah's vision was dramatic. He saw God sitting upon the throne. He heard the creatures singing praises. And he smelled the smoke that filled the Temple. It was a once in a lifetime experience – and it changed his life forever. Now he knew: God was still God. Earthly kingdoms might be swept away, but one thing remained eternal: the Holiness of the Almighty.

Holiness? In 21st century America? We have relaxed our standards way too far. We hear language and see things on television that would have been unthinkable a decade ago. Our cities have become chaotic jungles where homeless people harass passersby and children live and die in fear of drive-by killers. How do we find God in such a world? Well, maybe like William Boggs did.

The Reverend William Boggs was at a turning point in his life and faith. He felt he only had two paths open to his future. He was burned out physically, mentally and spiritually. And he either had to find new reserves of strength and direction, or he had to leave the ministry. He had to find a release from the stresses of his life and find a quiet place where he could listen for God's direction. And so he decided to visit a monastery for a sabbatical. At first he felt out of place when he checked into the monastic community. He was frightened and nervous. Here was a discipline unlike any he had known. But after a couple of days when he followed the

monastic routine of prayer, praise and silence, he began to settle down. He began to get caught up in the flow of worship and contemplation.

One afternoon as he entered his room, he felt he was ready and receptive. He thought about his life and how he was trying to do everything at once and all of it by himself. He realized he must spend more time with God in meditation and prayer – and less time in frenetic activity. As important as the work seemed to be, he must allow God to be his source of strength. He went to bed that night praising God, and knowing that God had accepted him for who he WAS and not for what he DID!

When everything seems out of control, that is the time we most need to put ourselves in the presence of the Holy. That's what William Boggs did. And that's what Isaiah did, too; he went to the Temple to pray. And there he experienced the Holiness of God.

Now, notice what happened next: Isaiah became acutely aware of his own sinfulness. In the presence of absolute Holiness, Isaiah became intensely aware of his own inadequacy. "Woe is me; I am lost," Isaiah exclaimed, "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 of hosts!". Isaiah felt unworthy. But there is nothing surprising about that; any of us feel that way when we experience the Holy.

I read a story about an unnamed professional golfer, playing in a tournament with President Gerald Ford, Jack Nicklaus and Billy Graham. After the round was over, one of the other pros on the tour asked, "Hey, what was it like playing with the President and Billy Graham?" The pro said with disdain, "I don't need Billy Graham stuffing religion down my throat!" With that, he headed for the practice tee. His friend followed and after the golfer had pounded out his fury on a bucket of golf balls, he asked "Was Billy a little rough on you out there?" The pro sighed and said with some embarrassment, "No, he didn't even mention religion."

Commenting on this event, R. C. Sproul, in his book, *The Holiness of God*, says, "Astonishingly, Billy Graham had said nothing about God, Jesus, or religion, yet the pro stomped away after the game accusing Billy of trying to ram religion down his throat." So what happened in this encounter? What happened was that in the presence of this world-famous evangelist, the

golfer was reminded of the existence of the Holy. Just as importantly, he was convicted of his own unholiness.

Maybe he began taking stock of his life. I hope so. That would be a healthy thing to happen to each one of us. There is no hope for advancement unless first of all, we become conscious of our need – we must be aware of our sinfulness. Isaiah had an experience of the Holy. And yet because he was aware of his sin, he felt unworthy of that experience.

Nevertheless, Isaiah heard God's call. Now, Isaiah could have been paralyzed by his experience. He could have been so overwhelmed by his sense of unworthiness that he gave up the battle. That happens to some people. But Isaiah was not paralyzed. In his vision, one of the winged creatures brought a hot coal to him from the altar and touched it to his lips. Then he heard a voice say that, because the coal had touched his lips, his sin was blotted out. He was forgiven ... Christian friends, that's a powerful story!

But notice that the story doesn't end there. Again, Isaiah hears the voice of God speaking from his heavenly throne. This time God asks a question, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Apparently without hesitation, Isaiah volunteers, "Here am I; send me!" Isaiah becomes a new man. He has experienced the forgiveness of God and it gives him a new beginning ...

There was a young man who served his country during the Vietnam War. He was the lead man on a jungle patrol - the one responsible for looking for land mines, booby traps, and ambushes. With every step he risked death, and if he made a mistake, his entire unit would be in danger. When the war was finally over, he couldn't believe that he was still alive while all his friends were dead. He often felt he would have been better off if he HAD died. He was haunted constantly by nightmares of his friends dying. As point man, he should have been killed first, so they could live. Slowly his spirit was robbed of life. He saw many doctors and had many tests, but no one could come up with a cure for his problems. Both his mind and his spirit continued to decline as time went by.

One day he went to visit the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC. Tears flowed freely as he touched the names of his friends etched in the hard black marble. He looked for and found every name he remembered – except

one. Back and forth he walked, touching the wall, looking for that one last name. He looked in the book that listed all the names and told where to find them on the wall. He asked the attendant for help, but the attendant couldn't find the name either.

“Are you sure that’s the right name?” the attendant asked him. Yes,” the man replied, “I’m sure. It’s MY name.” The attendant, obviously skilled in counseling, looked at him and said softly: “Your name isn’t here. You must be alive. Go home and get on with your life.” That was the word of grace the man needed. He was alive! And after a healing time he became a better man, a better husband a better father. It would have been so easy for that troubled soldier to give up. He had come perilously close to doing so. But he went to the black marble wall, and he had a “once upon a lifetime” experience. It was almost as if an angel of the Lord had touched a hot coal to his terrible memories and said to him, “It’s all gone. You are forgiven. You are free. Make a new start.”

Well, has it occurred to you yet? Have you realized that this is exactly the process we go through each time we come to worship? Or at least that’s what the order of service suggests that God is trying to get us to do:

- (1) We meet a Holy God.
- (2) Then as we are confronted with God and Holiness we realize and confess our sinfulness.
- (3) Next, God forgives us – gives us a fresh start – “cleanses us from all unrighteousness”.
- (4) And if all that has happened, there’s only one possible result. Our faces glow and our eyes shine as we go forth in song and prayer and in joyous enthusiasm saying “Here am I, send me.”

To God be the Glory. Amen

