

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Finding God on a Traumatic Path

(Isaiah 6:1-8)

Introduction: Training via trauma...

When someone tells you that they want to become a doctor, your first question, probably, will be, *“What’s your specialty?”* It’s almost a given that someone is not just going to be a doctor.

They are going to be an anesthesiologist, a pathologist, a dermatologist, an oncologist, or a surgeon. They’re going to go into internal medicine or pediatrics or psychiatry - and the list could go on.

One specialty that I wouldn’t want to practice (not that I’m planning to become a doctor) but am fascinated by, is Emergency medicine. Judging by the success of TV shows that focus on the Emergency Room, lots of other medical laypeople like me, are fascinated by Emergency medicine, too.

I wonder why we’re drawn to the ER. Maybe it’s therapeutic to watch trauma that isn’t ours. Maybe watching it takes our minds off of our own traumas. Maybe it brings to life the tension that the suffering we’re watching could be our own.

After all, trauma is indiscriminate. In any of its forms, it can strike anyone at any time. And trauma - the physical kind that will land you in the ER - or emotional or spiritual trauma is all around us.

Today, we’re going to see trauma in Scripture. Many of you have suffered trauma. Some of you are in traumatic situations now.

You’ll be able to relate.

We’ll see a man - a godly man - who is suffering a trauma, much like the traumas people today suffer. It involves loss and pain and an uncertain future. Then, while suffering that trauma, he encounters God - traumatically.

His world-shattering trauma leaves him shaken; and then his traumatic encounter with God leads to transformation.

The theme of the short passage we’re looking into today is God’s holiness. We’ll see that the journey that leads into His holiness traumatizes, but in a way that leads to brokenness and to service of our holy, holy, holy God.

Now, *holy* isn’t a word that we use very much outside of church. But it is a very important word for us to understand today.

Introduction to “Holiness”

Holiness - an Overview

The meaning of the word “holy”

There is a word for “holy” in the languages of the Old and New Testaments. In Hebrew, the word is *qadosh* and in Greek it is *hagios*.

The word occurs over eight hundred times in the Old Testament and over two hundred times in the New. To say that something is *holy* is to say that it is set apart for a special purpose.¹

The word can occur in secular contexts. Anything that is set apart for a special purpose is “holy.” My shovel is set apart for the purpose of hole-digging. My toothbrush is set aside for one purpose.

You may have clothes that you only get out on special occasions. They are set apart. In a secular sense, they are holy.

¹ It may come from an old Semitic root meaning “to divide.”

In the same way, if something is set aside for the purposes of God, we say that it is holy.

Examples of holy objects

In Scripture, there are some references to holy places, like the temple. There are holy days. One whole tribe of Jews, the Levites, was set apart for God. They were holy.

The priests' garments were holy. So was the Ark of the Covenant and the city of Jerusalem.

Some things are set aside for God. They are holy. But the Bible also says that God Himself is holy.

And to say that God is holy is to say two things about Him. First, it is to affirm His purity. God is morally perfect.

Holiness is Ethical Purity (from John 8)

As followers of Jesus, we aspire to lives of purity. The same was true back when Jesus lived. And in Jesus' day, the people most associated with moral purity were the Pharisees. Pharisees were all about separating from sin and sinners.

As committed as they were, though, to holy living, the Pharisees couldn't hold a candle to Jesus. Think with me about this scene John records for us in his Gospel. (chapter 8)

Jesus was urging the Jewish religious leaders to accept His message of salvation. They refused.

At one point, Jesus challenged them to find a reason for not believing in Him. He dared them: **[46] "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?"**

If I asked that question today, the line would instantly form to my left.

If the Pharisees had been looking for an opportunity to trash Jesus, this was it. He invited them to attack His character, dig deep to find dirt, look at His Search history and into the Dark Web.

What's notable here is that after Jesus asked the question, His enemies just stood there, silent.

We are so familiar with this passage that we sometimes don't see how remarkable it is.

I can't imagine any other figure in history offering his enemies the opportunity to take this kind of a shot at their character. Jesus did.

And, if His challenge is unique, even more amazing is the failure of His enemies to take it up. They had nothing to say.

Jesus, God's Son, was holy. He was pure.

But the idea of moral perfection is actually the secondary meaning of the term when we are considering the holiness of God.

More frequently, the idea of the holiness of God involves the idea of transcendence.²

Holiness is Transcendence (God is wholly "Other")

God's holiness drives us to think about God's "wholly 'otherness.'" He is above and beyond anything and anyone who is the world He has created. Consider...

When we talk about being creative, we mean that we can take what is, form it, shape it, and mold it into another sort of thing.

In creation, though, God did something more amazing than pull the universe out of His hat. He created the universe and all it contains with no prior existing universe - and no hat.

² The dictionary says that transcendence means "that which is beyond the limits of all possible experience and hence beyond knowledge."

And God created without difficulty. When you work on a project at your house, or when you fashion something out of wood, or metal or plastic, you have to work hard at it.

God didn't have to work hard to create the worlds. He just spoke the word - and the universe was.

When we describe God's relationship to His creation, we are thinking about His holiness. His *otherness*. He is unique. There is no one and nothing LIKE God.

The Bible assures us that this transcendent, holy God wants to establish relationship with people.

Much of the time, because He is kind, when He relates to us, He keeps His transcendent holiness hidden from view. He protects us from His holiness.

But there have been those times when He has broken through and given people glimpses of His holiness. One of those breakthrough moments came to one of Israel's greatest prophets: Isaiah.

Isaiah - A Moment of Supreme Insight (Isaiah 6:1-8)

King Uzziah's Good, Long Reign (2 Chronicles 26:1-23)

The life and times of a Jewish prophet

Prophets were, as a group, tough, rugged individualists. Given their assignment, they had to be.

Their job was to speak the word of God to people.³ And the record of the prophets reads like a history of martyrs.⁴

They were regularly abused by their audiences. Many of them were put to death for saying the unpopular thing.

³ Usually, they spoke to Israel and sometimes to other nations, like Jonah did.

⁴ According to Jewish tradition, Isaiah died a martyr's death at the hands of King Manasseh. He was placed inside a hollow log and was sawn in two. (Heb. 11:37)

Isaiah stood out as a prophet among prophets. He consistently spoke God's words to the kings of Judah throughout his whole, long life. He never shrank back.

We never once read of Isaiah compromising God's message. He spoke the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He was a courageous man of integrity, called by God to the lifetime role of prophet.

And he served as a prophet for a long time, prophesying during the reigns of four kings of Judah: Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah.

The life and times of King Uzziah

Uzziah, the first king under which Isaiah served, was a good king. He was one of the better kings of the southern kingdom. He wasn't as passionate about God as David was, but he wasn't as bad as many others.

It may be that the most important thing to know about Uzziah is that he reigned as king over Judah for fifty-two years.

Think about that. Judah lived under one king, one administration, one set of policies, for fifty two years.

Over the last 52 years, we have lived under the varied administrations of Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden.

We can't even imagine the stability that such a long and good reign would bring to a nation.

The Bible tells us that, in the main, Uzziah was a godly king. He ***[2 Kings 15:3] did what was right in the sight of the Lord.***⁵

He served the nation well.

He completed some necessary construction projects, built up the nation's infrastructure, successfully waged war, strengthened the

⁵ See 2 Chronicles 26 for a fuller account of Uzziah's reign.

defenses of Jerusalem and expanded the nation's agricultural productivity. All good stuff.⁶

A Crisis of Sovereignty (2 Kings 15:7)

With King Uzziah on the throne, the nation of Judah had come to feel secure. Because of Uzziah's presence, the prophet Isaiah's own world was stable, steady, consistent, reliable.

But early in the ministry of Isaiah, the world changed. ***[1] In the year of King Uzziah's death...***

Our nation knows what it is to have to mourn the loss of a great leader. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. There was an overwhelming outpouring of national grief.

When four and a half years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. and then Robert F. Kennedy were both killed, the nation reeled.

We saw last year the worldwide sadness at the death of Queen Elizabeth, who reigned longer than any other British monarch in history: seventy years.

But her reign was far more form than substance. When she passed, not much changed in the policies of Great Britain.

As tough as that loss was for Great Britain and as hard as our own losses have been, for Judah, the death of Uzziah was far worse.

For many (Isaiah among them), Uzziah had been the king for their whole lives. He was all they knew. They would desperately miss the stability of this godly old king's guiding hand.

And they would have had reason to fear the future. They didn't have the system that we have with our leaders to select the next one.

Uzziah's son would automatically become king. We can imagine the intense anxiety associated with the process of hereditary succession, especially after a good King like Uzziah.⁷

I suspect that Isaiah was distraught over the death of the king. He was a young man and had probably been mentored by Uzziah. Plus, the Isaiah had been Uzziah's spiritual advisor.

But now the world has changed. Uzziah was dead. The foundations were shifting. The future was uncertain. The international scene is scary. The domestic scene, too. The prophet was off-balance.

So, we read that in the year of King Uzziah's death, Isaiah made his way to the temple. He went to meet with God.

It might be that he went there to find perspective and guidance, comfort and consolation. We know that he did meet with God. Comfort and consolation, not so much.

Isaiah's Disintegration - and Back (Isaiah 6:1-8)

Isaiah's vision (vv. 1-4)

While worshipping, Isaiah was given a vision of God.

[1] In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.

The details of this vision are significant, especially that Isaiah was in the temple and saw the LORD sitting on a throne.

There was no throne in the Jerusalem temple.

The message of the vision is that even though the king was dead, Judah's KING of kings was alive and well.

⁶ Sadly, King Uzziah's life and reign did not end well. Late in life he became prideful and attempted to offer a sacrifice, which only the priests were allowed to do. When the priests tried to stop him, Uzziah became furious, and the Lord struck the king with leprosy.

⁷ Thankfully, Uzziah's son, Jotham, was a good and a God-fearing king. Jotham's son, Ahaz? Not so much...

We keep reading and learn about a buzz of activity around the KING's throne.

[2] Seraphim⁸ were standing above Him, each having six wings; with two each covered his face, and with two each covered his feet, and with two each flew.

The seraphim were not sinful men. They were sinless angels. Yet they still knew they needed to cover up in the presence of God.

As they flew, they sang a song.

[3] And one called out to another and said, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of armies. The whole earth is full of His glory."

There it is. It's the holiness of God that prompts the seraphim to cover their faces and their feet.

And let's pay attention to the three-fold repetition of the word *holy*. Repetition is a standard literary device. It highlights something important.

For instance, when Jesus wanted to emphasize something, He would begin with the formula, "**Truly, truly I say to you...**" This alerted His hearers to pay extra close attention to what He was about to say.

But, to give a threefold repetition, to elevate something to the third degree, reaches the limits of emphasis.

There is no more superlative way to express something than to repeat it three times. And in all of Scripture, only one attribute of God is elevated to the third degree: holiness.

I would never downplay either the love or the faithfulness of God, but nowhere in the Bible do we read that God is "*love, love, love*" or "*faithful, faithful, faithful*."

⁸ This is the only place in the Bible where *seraphim* appear. Evidently, they are a class or rank of angels, concerned with the worship and praise of God.

But in both the Old (here) and New Testaments (Revelation 4:8), we read that God is "***holy, holy, holy.***"

Isaiah watches this scene play out before him in his vision.

[4] And the foundation of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke.

The temple itself shakes like a leaf in a windstorm.

The doorposts, the inanimate thresholds, the wood and metal pieces that made the temple couldn't hear or speak. But they all had the good sense to be moved by the holiness of God.

Isaiah also had the good sense to shake. He was positively traumatized by this vision of God's holiness.

Isaiah's trauma (v. 5)

**[5] Then I said,
"Woe to me, for I am ruined!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I live among a people of unclean lips;⁹
For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of armies."**

You and I often speak of the joy of knowing God, or the good feelings that come our way as we think about God's nature, and His activity in our lives. OK. Nothing wrong with that. It's all good.

But, here in Isaiah 6, we can't miss that Isaiah's response to getting a glimpse of God was not so cheery.

And remember what kind of a person Isaiah was. Even if we compared him to the most godly person we know, Isaiah was a together man. He was a prophet.

⁹ This is also a figure of speech known as metonymy of the part for the whole. That is, the reference to the lips stands for all that Isaiah is. He recognized his complete moral uncleanness in the presence of God.

But the moment of his seeing God's holiness did something to him. It ripped him apart at the personal seams. It shattered his self-confidence.

It exposed him. It was as if he was naked before the gaze of the absolute *otherness* - the transcendent purity - of God.

It left him, in the words of the King James Version, "**undone**."¹⁰ This experience in the temple was for Isaiah a moment of personal disintegration.

To *integrate* means to bring together. A person of *integrity* is someone whose life fits together.

Seeing God in His holiness un-did Isaiah.

As he witnessed the unfolding revelation of the transcendent holiness of God, he became aware of his personal sinfulness. God met Isaiah at his point of need and graciously dealt with Isaiah's sin.¹¹

Isaiah's cleansing (vv. 6-7)

[6] Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. [7] He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your guilt is taken away, and atonement is made for your sin."

Now that would have been painful. Touching his mouth with a burning coal. Ouch. But we get what is going on.

Isaiah's close encounter with God's holiness sensitized him to his sin. The painful "burning-coal-to-the-mouth" therapy cleansed his impurity. Wiped away his sin.

¹⁰ I prefer this translation "***I am undone!***" to that of the New American Standard or the New International Version which translate, "***ruined***."

¹¹ You will notice that God did not exactly set out to show Isaiah his sinfulness. He merely showed Isaiah His own holiness, which set Isaiah's sinfulness in sharp relief.

This is an example of God's bold love and severe mercy. It was a cauterizing moment of forgiveness and remaking.

So, what do we have here? Well, added on top of the trauma Isaiah had experienced when King Uzziah died is the trauma of experiencing the holiness of God.

The first trauma ripped away the external props on which he had depended. It opened his eyes to his weakness. He saw clearly how little control he had over anything. We've been there. We see that, too.

The second trauma "**ruined**" him. He's had his moment of supreme insight, and he can never return to the illusion of personal togetherness he had before. He's seen the KING.

And seeing the "**holy, holy, holy**" KING was the transformative moment that energized him for the post-Uzziah chapters of his life.

Isaiah's mission (vv. 8ff)

[8] Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

It is as clear as a bell what happened here. Isaiah gained insight into the holiness of God.

THAT drove him to see his own utter sinfulness and need.

THAT drove him to his knees in brokenness and "**ruin**."

THAT prompted God to extend grace and mercy and cleansing.

And THAT moved Isaiah to serve his KING in whatever way he could, wherever that might lead, in whatever the KING commanded.

This is a well-established pattern, and we see it repeated over and over and over in the Bible.

Other Moments of Supreme Insight

Of all the times we see the pattern repeating, I want to look with you at an experience the disciples had near the beginning of their time with Jesus.

Mark records this incident (Mark, chapter 4), and the setting would be my worst nightmare. The disciples were overtaken by a violent storm ("**a fierce gale of wind**") in a small boat in the middle of the Sea of Galilee - at night.

They were rowing for all they were worth. But, while there were thirteen men on board, there were only twelve hands on deck because Jesus was asleep at the back of the boat.

The disciples woke Him up - and we don't know exactly why.

Did they want Him to pray for them to arrive safely in Heaven after they drowned? Did they hope that His prayers might help where theirs had not? Did they want Him to grab an oar and row?

They wanted Him to do something, to at least care. **[Mark 4:38] "Master, do You not care that we are perishing?"**

Yes, He cared. **[39] And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm.**

So, put yourself in the disciples' shoes.

One minute you are gripping the sides of a roller-coaster; the next, you are sitting in a dead calm. One moment you are convinced you are perishing; the next, the sea is glass.

What is going through your mind?

Jesus didn't say a prayer here. He didn't ask God to deliver them from the storm. He simply commanded the sea to calm down - and it did.

We aren't surprised that the disciples were afraid during the storm. Now that the storm is over, we would have thought that their fear would be gone. Nope. They **[41] "became very much afraid."**

The disciples had interacted with all kinds of people in the past - Jews, Romans, Greeks, sinners and tax-collectors, Pharisees,

tradesmen. But they had never met a holy Man, a Man who could speak to winds and waves and have them obey Him.

Jesus was unique. He possessed a wholly, supernatural, majestic "*otherness*" that left them just as badly shaken as Isaiah had been after his vision.¹² It was their moment of supreme insight.

So, where do we go from here?

Final thought: One More Moment of Supreme Insight?

The greatest ending to this message would be if I could arrange for a theophany, an appearance of God in His transcendent holiness.

That would put an exclamation mark on everything we've seen.

If we could just call in an appearance of six-winged seraphim to fly around the room and follow that up with a burning bush at the exits, then we, too, would have our moment of supreme insight and we, too, would never be the same.

The thing is, of course, that we can't orchestrate a theophany. God doesn't appear on command.

But the beauty and the power of the Word of God is that the story we have heard today passes through the centuries and across the miles from the experience of Isaiah to our ears and to our hearts.

¹² Or this, from Luke 5: After a night of catching no fish, Jesus told the disciples, **[Luke 5:4] "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."** I imagine Peter thinking something like, "*Preachers! They always think they know everything!*" But they did what He told them to do, and the result was a contest among the fish to see who could jump into the nets the fastest. The disciples had to call out more boats to help - and Peter wanted to get away from Jesus. This was likely the largest catch of his life, but profits and income were the farthest thing from his mind. He asked Jesus to depart, to give him space, to leave him alone. Peter saw Jesus' holiness. His otherness.

The experience Isaiah had with the LORD in the temple and the experience the disciples had with Jesus on the Sea of Galilee speak to us because those guys dealt with the same God we do.

Our God is holy. So, is a message about God's holiness exactly what you need right now?

It is if life is proving more than you can handle. It is if your life's foundations are shaking, if you are facing uncertainty, danger, loss, failure, upheaval, or pain.

The news that God is "**holy, holy, holy**" will "**ruin / un-do**" you. And it will put you back together again.

That's because this holy (wholly Other) God is also the God who loves you and cleanses you from your guilt by the amazing grace of Jesus.

He is the One who calls you to serve Him. And He is the One we answer, "**Here am I. Send me!**"