

A SUSTAINING VISION

November 22, 1963, was the day President Kennedy was assassinated. Those of us who were alive back then can probably remember exactly what we were doing when we first heard the news. I was in music class at Bowdoin College and the professor announced, "The President has just been shot in Dallas!" September 11, 2001, was the day terrorist planes flew into the World Trade Center. I arrived home after getting physical therapy for an arthritic hip, and my mother had the television on, and we watched in dismay as the first tower collapsed. Do you remember what you were doing?

The prophet Isaiah remembers exactly what he was doing at *his* time of national calamity. ***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.***

Uzziah and Isaiah – two different people with similar-sounding names. King Uzziah was a just and capable ruler. He did not deserve to die as he did, a leper, quarantined and shunned inside his own royal palace. It was a time of national questioning and anxiety.

Isaiah the prophet was presumably at worship in the temple. The vast scale of his vision is indicated by the way the mere edge of the Lord's robe filled the whole inner space of the sanctuary.

And then there were the angels! ***Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew.***

In our culture we tend to be sweetly sentimental about angels, but there is nothing sweet or sentimental about these angels. The word "seraph" comes from a Hebrew verb *saraf* meaning *to blaze or burn brightly*. Imagine huge forms made of incandescent fire, each with six wings. Two of their wings cover their faces, because even these terrifying and resplendent beings cannot bear to look directly at God. Two of their wings cover their feet, which is the polite Hebrew idiom referring to their private parts. And then there are still two wings to keep them aloft around God's throne.

They were praising God. ***And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."*** The hosts are heavenly armies of countless angels. The song of the seraphs proclaims the utter transcendence of God, far above and beyond all creation, and yet the earth itself

reflects the beauty and glory of his holiness. The three-fold repetition of “holy” is presumably why this passage gets read today, on Trinity Sunday. But it’s simply the Hebrew language’s way of saying that the LORD is the holiest of all.

Those seraphs had really loud voices, loud enough to rattle the door hinges! ***The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house [that is, the temple] was filled with smoke.*** This is the smoke of incense, the smoke of burnt offerings on the altar, even the supernatural smoke that veils the unknowable mystery of God.

Isaiah was completely undone by this vision. ***And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”*** Isaiah was prostrated by the sense of his own unworthiness. Unclean lips symbolize the impurity of his whole nature, and the impurity of all the people among whom he lives. If the seraphs have to veil their faces in the presence of God, how much more must we sinful humans! Way back in the Book of Exodus, the LORD said to Moses, “No one can look upon my face and live.”

But Isaiah didn’t drop dead at the sight; nor was he abandoned. He was purified. ***Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.*** The altar would have had fire on it, for consuming burnt offerings of animals and grain, and a live coal from the holy altar would have been holy as well.

The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Guilt and sin are burned away. This is a powerful image of the sanctifying, cleansing, purifying power of God, which can sometimes be very painful.

A humbled, sanctified, cleansed, purified Isaiah is able to hear God’s words. ***Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?”*** The Christian church has heard the plural pronoun “us” giving another hint of the Trinity, but it probably refers to the heavenly council of God and the angels.

What’s the outcome? Isaiah volunteers. ***And I said, “Here am I; send me!”***

Think about Isaiah’s story. Reflect on his experience.

First comes the overwhelming vision: Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; heaven and earth are full of his glory; the hem of his robe fills the temple; the pivots on the thresholds shake at the voices of the blazing seraphs; woe is me, for I am lost!

Then the painful purification follows: one of the seraphs touches his mouth with a live coal; your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.

And finally come the small, utterly simple words of acceptance: Here am I; send me!

In a way, Isaiah's story, Isaiah's experience, happens to us all. Not necessarily in a dramatic and overwhelming way as it did for him, but usually in a quiet and ordinary way. And usually in reverse order: first acceptance, then purification, and finally vision.

Acceptance. We're nothing special. We show up. Here we are, God. Baptize us. Feed us. Send us. Please!

Purification. Not with a live coal wielded by a seraph (Thank God!) but in the ordinary experiences of life's ups and downs, frustrations and anxieties, disappointments and hassles. These are the things that rub away the rough edges of our pride and rugged individualism. These are the things that teach us flexibility and compassion and humility.

Vision. Not a thunderclapping, blinding, terrifying, overwhelming experience of the full and unbearable majesty of Holy, Holy, Holy Almighty God, complete with blazing seraphs.

God graciously gives us something much more gentle and quiet. Years of faithful attendance at worship, hours devoted to prayer, reading and meditating on God's word in Scripture, fasting to moderate our appetites, almsgiving to accustom us to generosity, all these things begin to bear fruit.

We gradually get to know who God is, we begin to have a deeper sense of God's presence in our lives -- a sustaining vision that gives us hope,
a sustaining vision that inspires our love,
a sustaining vision that strengthens our faith,
a sustaining vision that brings us peace in a troubled world,
a sustaining vision that calls us forward into an eternity that
begins right here and right now,
a sustaining vision of God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

AMEN.