

McCabe United Methodist Church

Part 7, Ghost Stories: Tales of Holy Visions & Divine Encounters:
2017 Summer Series

When a Stump Becomes an Altar

Sermon on Isaiah 6 (7/29 & 7/30/17)

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When I was a bit younger, I was fond of doing a stupid, little joke when the opportunity arose for it. The first time I did this stupid, little joke was sometime while I was in seminary in the Chicago area.

In downtown Chicago, there is a restaurant called Rock Bottom. (It's part of a chain of restaurants with this name, but the first one I recall encountering is the one in downtown Chicago.)

Well, one day, years ago, I was with friends, walking around the city, and we happened upon the Rock Bottom restaurant. As we approached, the joke occurred to me. So, I ran up to the restaurant's outside wall and hit it, hard, with my hand. My friends rolled their eyes. "See what I did there," I said, "*I hit rock bottom!*"

It worth an eye roll. And, honestly, it's not a joke I would likely make anymore because, as sometimes happens, this joke feels rather tasteless. "Hitting rock bottom" is really no laughing matter.

The concept of "rock bottom" is widely used related to addiction recovery, whether the addiction is alcohol-, drug-, or food-related.

"Rock bottom" means you've gone as low as you can possibly go: at rock bottom, your addiction has taken over your life – destroying your health, your work, your relationships. Very often, people lost in addiction don't realize their desperate need to change until they've hit rock bottom.

Of course, a person can hit rock bottom without being under the influence of an *addiction*, per se. We can hit rock bottom in a romantic relationship or a friendship... things unravel over time and, all of a sudden, we feel like we don't know each other anymore ... We can hit rock bottom in school, at work: we begin to get behind and things snowball out of control ...

We can hit rock bottom with our finances... our spending gets out of control, credit card balances go up, and we don't know how to turn things around.

None of us is immune to rock bottom... and, when we hit it, it's very often some sort of holy vision or divine encounter that helps us turn upward.

So far, in this summer's *Ghost Stories* series here at McCabe, we've explored the ways God was powerfully present to biblical figures like Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Moses, and Samuel. Through a holy vision or a divine encounter, God was made known to each of those persons... and, after that vision or encounter, life was never the same.

Last week, Pastor Mark preached about the prophet Elijah – about how Elijah challenged God's people to have a passionate faith... a faith wherein their allegiance, and their *worship* would go, first and foremost, to the Lord God. And, of course, a prophet really only offers such a challenge when the devotion of the people is wavering.

As people of faith, we have a word for what keeps us from turning our allegiance and our worship to the Lord God. That word is *sin*.

Sin is a state-of-being whereby we are inherently self-involved, where we get impossibly focused on ourselves and on our own little worlds. *Sin* is a state of forgetting to look up toward the God who created us and who calls us to a life shaped by love of God and love of neighbor.

It's the *state* of sin that causes us to commit *sins*. And, while many folks like to focus on sins that seem somehow “bigger” than other sins, a *sin* is really any thought, word, or deed that puts distance between us and God, or that puts distance between us and our neighbor. And, friends, *any sin* can drive us to our own rock bottom.

True confessions: an ongoing sin in my life is the sin of judgmental thoughts... whether those thoughts are about individuals in my life, or about entire groups of people – like, for example, those whose politics do not mirror my own. Every judgmental thought I have – and then *indulge* – is a sin worth confessing. Each and every judgmental thought distances me from God and from the neighbors God calls me to love.

*“Woe to me,” Isaiah said. “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips...”*¹

I don't know about you, but I can relate to Isaiah for sure.

I suspect *any of us* who has a sense of our own sinfulness can relate to Isaiah. I mean, can you even *imagine* what it would have been like for him to experience the holy vision we learn about in Isaiah 6? Hear again the first four verses:

¹In 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. ²Above him were seraphim², each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³And they were calling to one another:



*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

⁴At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

The setting for this holy and majestic vision was the temple sanctuary in Jerusalem. At the time, God's people believed it was in the temple sanctuary that God's very presence lived on earth. Of course, they believed God's presence could be experienced elsewhere, away from the temple sanctuary, but the temple sanctuary was particularly holy.

As I reflected on the Isaiah 6 vision this past week, I hoped I could find the perfect piece of visual art to share with you via the screen. After all, the vision is visually stunning: Isaiah in the temple sanctuary, surrounded by the choir of six-winged seraphim, with the Lord's robe billowing down to the floor from heaven. But I couldn't find any images I liked, which was disappointing.

¹ Isaiah 6: 5

² <http://orig00.deviantart.net/5ee5/f/2012/205/c/b/cb179460994c06a88b1ccce9dfb922e8-d58frlw.jpg>

However, I was disappointed only for a moment... because I quickly realized it seemed just right: of *course*, there are no perfect images of Isaiah's vision. His vision was too holy to be turned into a perfect piece of visual art.

Consider with me that Isaiah's vision of the Lord, with robes billowing to the floor from heaven, and with six-winged seraphim flying about, singing the perpetual worship song, "Holy, holy, holy!" ... consider that this vision inspired in Isaiah an immediate response of *unworthiness*.

⁴At the sound of their [the seraphim's] voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. ³"Woe to me!" I [Isaiah] cried, "I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips..."

In other words: "I am a sinner who is not worthy to be surrounded by such holy majesty."

Frankly, this is a rather appropriate response to a holy vision or divine encounter. How many of us have had the same sense of unworthiness – or of being small – in the face of God's grandeur?

Looking at a gorgeous, snow-capped mountain range; observing the wind whispering across a field of canola; holding a newborn baby; receiving a generous gift; being forgiven. "*Woe to me! I am ruined!*" *I'm a sinner and I am not worthy of such holy goodness.*"

In the midst of holy visions and divine encounters like these, if we do *not* experience a sense of unworthiness, or, if we do not experience a sense of being small in the face of God's overwhelming presence, we may want to check our ego and pray for some humility!

Isaiah had exactly the right and faithful response to God's awesome presence in that sanctuary nearly 3,000 years ago. He experienced God's holiness, he proclaimed his unworthiness... and, then, after receiving forgiveness, he agreed to go where God would send him. "Whom shall I send?" the Lord had

asked. “Here am I, send me!” Isaiah responded.³

And, when the full Scripture was read a bit ago, did you notice how Isaiah said, “send me” *before* God told him just what exactly he was agreeing to?

The calling God placed on Isaiah was not the most joy-filled of callings: Isaiah was to preach to a people who would never understand God's message for them... a people whose hearts would be perpetually calloused.

How many of us would be enthusiastic about such a calling? I suspect I might have retracted my offer to accept God's call. Yet Isaiah persisted.

He didn't change his mind... he simply wanted to know for how long he would need to do this. (He was probably knew that we humans can do just about any unpleasant task if we know for how long we have to do it.)

But the Lord's response probably wasn't what Isaiah was hoping for.

“Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant,” God replied. “Until the land is utterly forsaken.”⁴ It was to be a time of harsh discipline for God's people... and there seemed to be no good news in sight for Isaiah *or* for God's people.

Now, it's worth noting that, when you read the Bible – the Old Testament in particular – God disciplined the people when they or their leaders strayed from the Lord's ways: when they misused worship, when they disregarded the commandments, and when they forgot about – or blatantly mistreated – the poor and vulnerable among them. All of these things were signs that they were lost in sin, the consequences of which felt like harsh discipline from God.

At the time of the prophet Isaiah, God's people – the people of Israel – were under threat of being taken over by the Assyrian Empire. Their leaders were being taken captive away from Israel and, over time, much of the land of Israel fell to the Assyrians.

They believed this was the result of their sin.

³ Isaiah 6: 8 New International Version (NIV)

⁴ Isaiah 6: 11 (*partial*) NIV

It's what the Lord communicated to Isaiah in today's holy vision... and there appeared to be no good news anywhere in it.

According to the Lord's words to Isaiah, the people were going to hit rock bottom... and Isaiah was going to be their prophet all way down. What an

awful calling! Who would say “yes” to something with so little joy, so little good news? Well...

After the Lord declared to Isaiah that the cities would eventually lie in ruin, the houses be deserted, fields ravaged, and all but a tenth of the people would be sent away... after the Lord declared all that bad news to Isaiah, God said this:

“But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be a stump in the land.” [The *terebinth* is a kind of tree found in the Middle East , photo⁵]



The message God gave for Isaiah to proclaim to the people was all discipline and devastation. Rock bottom as a result of their sin – rock bottom with seemingly no hope after the hit.

Chapter six of Isaiah begins with the prophet Isaiah at the altar of the Lord, experiencing God's holiness and majesty with light and fire and angels and holy smoke all around.

Chapter six *begins* with the most glorious of altars... and then it becomes a tale of woe, of harsh consequences... a tale of a people who will soon be hitting rock bottom.

But, sometimes, rock bottom is what you have to hit before a glorious new beginning. And, in the end of the vision there emerges a *stump of hope*.

⁵ <http://www.biblewalks.com/Photos130/AbelBethMaacah48s.jpg>

“As the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be a stump in the land.”⁶



There is, indeed, good news in this holy vision – even though the vision is full of discipline and devastation. There *is* good news and it is foreshadowed early in the story: when Isaiah proclaims his unworthiness, confesses his unclean lips, confesses his people's unclean lips... and then the Lord's angels proclaim forgiveness.

Forgiveness. God's answer to our sin. The beautiful new beginning offered to us when we hit rock bottom. Forgiveness was God's answer to Isaiah's confessed sin... and it would be God's answer to the land when it lay ruined.

“As the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be a stump in the land.”

The good news of Isaiah 6 is that, through this holy vision, we are reminded that there is forgiveness for our sin. The even greater good news for those of us who call ourselves Christian, is that, just five chapters after *this* vision, God shares another vision – another vision that calls to mind the stumps at the end of chapter 6.

In a passage we often hear around Christmas, at the beginning of Isaiah chapter 11, the Lord proclaims that *“a shoot will come from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit.”⁷*

We believe this fruit-bearing branch, from the shoot of a seemingly dead, old stump... we believe this is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the holy One who forgives our sin and who calls us to follow him.

The beginning of Isaiah 6 finds us at a grand and glorious altar in the temple sanctuary. In the middle of Isaiah 6, we hit the rock bottom of our sin. And, then, the *end* of Isaiah 6 brings us to the foot of a stump – a stump that becomes another sort of altar... an altar that reminds us of Jesus.

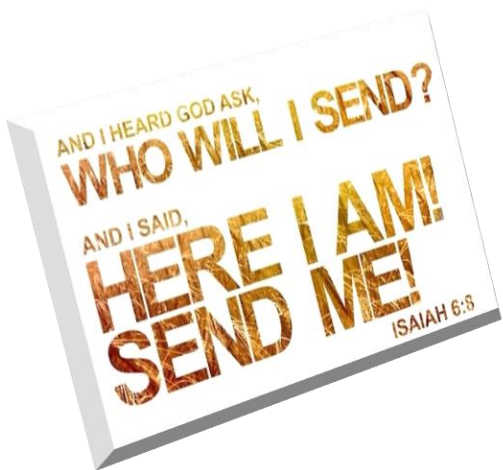
⁶ Isaiah 6: 13b NIV photo: <http://images.christianpost.com/full/42783/tree-stump.jpg>

⁷ Isaiah 11: 1 NIV

Because even out of a stump, hope can spring... even out of sin, hope can spring... even when we are lost in ourselves... even when we hit rock bottom, hope can spring. Hope *will* spring. That's the gift of forgiveness.

And when we experience the gift of forgiveness, like Isaiah, we can't help but respond with awe, with gratitude, and with the proclamation, "Here I am, Lord, send me!"

Let us pray...⁸



⁸Child: <http://oneofthehoraios.tumblr.com/page/74>

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Wall sign: <https://i.pinimg.com/736x/0e/ef/3c/0eef3cabb0f87baf134a4c1f545d4dbf.jpg>