

“Coal & Call”

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Isaiah 6

Coal is not so popular these days – in the midst of environmental concerns about carbon emissions with the use of fossil fuels, coal is one of the major offenders when it comes to concerns about how to reduce greenhouse gasses, how to clean up our air and bring global warming under control – coal is not so popular. There’s talk of clean coal – being able to use coal in an efficient, non-polluting way – but I’ve heard a lot of skepticism about clean coal technology as well...that the only really clean coal is the coal that stays in the ground!

I was thinking about coal because of the image of coal that is described in the vision that we heard in Isaiah 6 – there is a burning coal that is used to purify Isaiah. And although I realize the comparison is a bit of a stretch, I was thinking with coal not being so popular in today’s environmental context that I find it’s also true that this image in Isaiah of a burning coal cleansing an unclean, impure person is not so popular in today’s theological context either. There’s a broad theological spectrum throughout the church, throughout religion, but there is a particular dynamic to, place in, that spectrum that does not tend to emphasize the impurity and sinfulness and uncleanness of humanity in need of a radical cleansing by God – and it is my experience that many people at Hope Church hang out somewhere in that part of the theological spectrum. And there are good reasons for that – many people have had an experience of religion, of Christianity...in their childhood perhaps, or as a teen or an adult too...an experience that was one primarily of condemnation, of fear – one that often connected to a sense of obligation and strictness – the message of judgment - the constant sense of sinfulness and unworthiness was at the center – and the ever-present uncertainty and anxiety of if you were truly held in God’s grace or not –uncertainty for you and for others. People

react to that kind of experience of the Christian faith: they wonder about God's love and grace – about human goodness and giftedness – about God's mercy and compassion...

So I'm just saying – with that kind of theological setting that I think is present - to some degree in this church body, and for many beyond us - and certainly a kind of modern view that people have whether still a part of the church or not...in that context we hear this from Isaiah: “woe is me – I am lost – I am unclean – my lips are unclean – all the people around me are unclean...” Isaiah has certainly embraced the sense of sinfulness and guilt and condemnation we have heard before. And then the solution for this is the coal – a burning coal from the altar at God's throne – touched to Isaiah's lips – and the message is ‘your guilt is taken away – your sin is blotted out.’ OK – but ouch! – does that strike anyone else as a painful image (and not just because I have more surface area there than most people!). A burning coal touched to Isaiah – this is a painful (can I say violent?), sort of image given to cleanse this sinful man I just want to put out on the table what I think is true – this coal image – this dynamic of utter sinfulness and painful redemption - is not the most inviting or meaningful for many today.

So there is the coal – and then there is the call – the voice of the LORD calls out “who shall I send – who shall go for us...?” – and Isaiah responds “Here I am – send me”. And as long as I've called into question the coal image, I might as well take a few shots at the call idea as well. I realize that sense of being called may be much more inviting, but as a minister I have a few of my own issues with the language of call and calling – which is mainly that I get irritated when only ministers seem to think they are called – when only certain vocations of ministry and ordained ministry are described in that language of calling – when only certain people of faith are identified as being called. I think that is a destructive dynamic that has been perpetuated in the church, often by leaders – and one way of looking at this Isaiah story is that it perpetuates such a view of things: the call of Isaiah has potentially a very exclusive kind of tone to it – is

this kind of call just for Isaiah? just for this special role of prophet? – just for this special person? – just for this person with an unusual vision? There is great drama to this call of Isaiah – the kind of drama that could give the message that it is only for special folks like Isaiah – only for a chosen few – and most others are just bystanders...

Alright – I have some other ideas about these coal and call images in Isaiah other than just critiquing them – but it seems important to me that we recognize some of those dynamics going on as we encounter such things; to listen to some of the messages present in and around us that have been expressed for a long time – that can get ingrained in us in ways we're not even fully aware of. If you would look at the coal and the call in this vision only in the way I've described it so far - we would be left to wonder about if it is all about unworthiness and exclusiveness.

Well, it's not – and in order to really see that, we need to start not in the middle with the coal and the call – but instead at the beginning of Isaiah's vision. Do you remember what is there? A vision of God, enthroned in power, and the heavenly hosts sing a song: 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord – the whole earth is full of God's glory – holy, holy, holy...' This vision starts with God and who God is – the holiness of God – which is God's purity of power and truth – the eternity of God's presence and faithfulness – the goodness and justice of who God is. To experience the person and presence of God is to respond with this song - 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord...' And when we see that this vision starts there, we are given a new perspective on the coal part in the middle – this is not about God condemning Isaiah – if you look and see, that's not what happens – it is Isaiah coming to an awareness himself of his condition. For us to truly be in relationship with God - in the presence of God – is to have a deep sense of the gulf between God's holiness and our reality – to have a clear picture of the fullness of God's ways and the broken ways of our lives. That is something very personal and necessary for each of us, but in the context of the holiness of God, this is not about condemnation, about fear, about diminishment, it is about our depth of need and the truth of who God is

that can meet that need. Just because addressing sin and human shortcoming have been misused to promote fear and condemnation, it does us no good to throw that reality out – there is in us a deep need for cleansing, wholeness...and we see that the holy God is the only one who can give the grace we need. And when we take things out of the context of fear and condemnation, we are also able to broaden our view and know that the uncleanness is not just about what we do, it is also about when we and others are sinned against – it is about the brokenness around and beyond us – it is the whole world that is full of God's glory also being a broken world that needs the touch of God's holiness. The burning coal is grace – we can see that, trust that, believe that – it is what we cry out for in need of: the touch of God's presence, of God's holiness, cleansing, renewing, saving, recreating.

Starting with 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord...' impacts how we understand the coal, and it also impacts how we hear the call part of the vision. This call is about Isaiah, but it is not just about him – and not about any one person – no superiority or exclusivity or privilege given with this call. It is about reflecting, expressing 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord...' It is the call that is the same for all who worship God, to have one's life speak the truth of who God is and how life is to be in response to God's goodness and faithfulness. Certainly in Scripture there is a pattern of particular people discerning particular calls, special calls to carry out God's will – but the intention of those particular calls is always to bring about something far beyond that person – it is always about the call to God's people to reflect the holiness of God, and for God's people to bring that holiness and wholeness to all of God's children - the call for all of life to echo 'holy, holy, holy is the Lord...'

That is the purpose of coal and call – to tune our lives to that song, knowing that we are created to express the holiness of God – the goodness and grace of life. It reminded me of the Pentecost story last Sunday – followers of Christ finding their voices through the wind and fire of the Spirit; and here in Isaiah something like that –

the coal and call are what allow him to find his voice, our voice, for ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord...’ in our lives.

We need the beginning of the vision to understand the coal and call – and we also need the end. If you were paying close attention, you may have wondered why I’ve said that coal and call are in the middle, since they are at the end of the reading today – but it is really Isaiah carrying out his call in the following chapters that is the conclusion to this vision – and it is a very difficult road that this call leads him on. He is a voice that challenges the powers of the day, that seeks to transform the culture of the day – he is a voice calling for repentance, change, renewal – he expresses the anger of God, the compassion of God, the vision of God in a broken world – he is a voice that goes against the current of the day. It’s not always – often – easy to live into the call God gives to us...whatever that may look like in your life – to faithfully express the holiness of God puts us often at odds with the current of our day – of our culture – sometimes even of our church. As the General Synod of our denomination considers the Belhar Confession, we can pray for that call to be embraced by the RCA – but it will not be easy to have the courage to take on that call – it will not be easy to live it out if we do – it is a call that will judge us for our shortcomings, that will cleanse us with God’s truth, that will equip us to express in a new way the song we were created to share with all God’s children: ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord...’ And because it is so difficult, that is why we must begin and end with the holiness of God – when our lives are tuned to that song, we can look at our lives and our world in the honesty of God’s grace, power and goodness – which in the midst of the struggle turns us from what we can do ourselves to the truth that it is God who is before and beyond and within all of the faithfulness we seek. When our lives individually and together are tuned to this song - ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord...’ - it will come out sounding something like this: “here I am, Lord – send me” AMEN.