

"Called into Mission"
(Isaiah 6:1-13)
February 6, 2022

Isaiah is well-known in both Jewish religion and Christianity. We know that he was a prophet, and there are many of his quotations in the gospels, e.g., about a virgin conceiving a child (Matt 1:23/ Is 7:14), the voice in the wilderness (Matt 3:3, Mk 1:2, Lk 3:4, Jn 1:23/ Is 40:3), God's chosen servant (Matt 12:18-21/Is 42:1-7), the light to the Gentiles (Lk 2:32/Is 42:6, 49:6), the temple is a house of prayer (Matt 21:13, Mk 11:17, Lk 19:46/Is 56:7), and the closed eyes and ears of God's people (Matt 13:14, Mk 4:12, Lk 8:10, Jn 12:39/Is 6:9-10), which relates to today's scripture reading.

Today's reading described a critical event that happened to Isaiah in the temple. It happened in the year Uzziah, the king of Judah, died. For your information, both kingdoms, Israel and Judah, under the rules of Jeroboam and Uzziah, enjoyed an extraordinarily long period of peace. Assyria at the NE and Egypt at the SW were both on the decline and presented no threat to the smaller nations of Syria-Palestine. Israel and Judah took the opportunity to expand their borders to the previous empire of David and Solomon. Uzziah, also named Azariah, became king at the age of 16, and during his reign for 52 years, he did "what was right in the eyes of Yahweh." (2 Kgs 15:2-3; 2 Chr 26:3-4) However, something he did was considered seriously wrong. Either because he didn't remove high places in Judah that obstructed the centralization of sacrificial rituals in the temple, or he burnt incense himself in the temple that offended the chief priest. The chief priest accompanied 90 priests to challenge Uzziah, and suddenly a skin disease broke out

on his forehead. (2 Kg 15: 4-5; 2 Chr 26:16-21) The disease forced him to turn over much of his responsibility as a king to his son Jotham until he died.

Was the date named to be in the year of King Uzziah important to the vision and mission of Isaiah? Yes, it was. It indicated the end of their enjoyed peace due to Uzziah's death. Without the prosperity and protection that Uzziah provided, the religious authority must face the consequences for their insistence on the "right" ways of doing things, i.e., the temple was the only place for worshiping God, and the descendants of Aaron were the only holy persons allowed to do the ceremonies.

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." Those who served in the temple were not priests but seraphim, angelic figures with whom the descendants of Aaron couldn't match. They were flying in the temple, singing, and chanting. The praise was so loud that the doorposts and thresholds shook. Also, smoke filled the space. Isaiah saw a throne more precious than Uzziah's. God who sat on it was so great that even the train of his robe would fill the temple. Isaiah was in the middle of this spectacular vision. His feeling and response were not different from others who encountered God directly. He found himself an unclean creature, the same as the people he belonged, standing in front of the Most Holy King, the Lord Almighty. "Woe to me! I am ruined!" Now, watch what one of the seraphim did! It took a live coal from the altar. The extraction was done carefully and procedurally correctly by using tongs. The seraph took the live coal in his hand and touched Isaiah's mouth with it. It must be painful. But the result seemed to justify the pain. The seraph said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." The pain had taken away Isaiah's worry, his uncleanness, something he could not overcome. Only after that,

he heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"
Isaiah responded to that call spontaneously, "Here am I. Send me!"

"Here am I. Send me!" Does it sound familiar or strange to you? I remember the teacher's pets always said that. Most would say no. And there are plenty of reasons to say no, you know, "I am tired," "I am too busy," "I am not used to," "I am unable to," just say something. In Isaiah's case, it was like signing a blank check, since both the dollar amount and the nature are unknown. Only after his commitment, God clarified that the mission for Isaiah was a "Show-and-tell." So, what should Isaiah do? "Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes." (Is 6: 10a) Was it the task? Was God serious?

Unfortunately, God was. God said further, "Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed." (Is 6:10b) The nature of this task was disastrous. And the words would provoke specifically "the people" who believed that they did things correctly to keep the situation stable. What's wrong if everyone stuck to what they were doing? When nobody rocked the boat, then prosperity and the status of God's people would not change. Holy is holy, and profane is profane. Just don't cross the boundary! They believed that maintaining the rituals as they were would keep the balance. Uzziah stepped on the toes of the priests, disregarded that there were unbridgeable gaps.

It was shocking to Isaiah when he knew the detail of his task. "For how long, Lord?" he asked out of concern for his countrymen, for the mission was too harsh. However, God was serious. The total destruction and exile would happen to the cities, their inhabitants, houses, fields, royal families, and priestly families. It would look like ground zero. In reality, the catastrophe did happen to Israel in 721 BCE and to Judah in 587 BCE.

Luckily, it's about something that happened in the past, and it's all over. Do you think so? God is holy, which implies that God sees the creation from a very different perspective. Our country takes retirement seriously. It is justified to buy good stocks, sit on them, and enjoy good returns. The buy low, sell high strategy has been around for centuries. Do you think God might be happy to see Canadians investing their money for noble causes, e.g., to avoid companies that manufacture or distribute unhealthy products? Our country cares about its relationship with the aboriginal First Nations. Do you think God might be happy to see the government reviewing the Indian Act, providing more room to First Nation people, stopping urging them to sell their land for cheap and give up their rights? Our country is rich. The COVID pandemic has, however, alerted us that poverty can happen very quickly to anyone. Do you think God might be happy to see us finding plans to address the persistent financial vulnerabilities within our country?

If we transfer the above concerns from our country to the church, what do you think we can do together that pleases God? How often do we talk about Christian ethics other than the professional ethics that bind us? Do we dare to advocate openly for the First Nation people, homeless people, people of color, and vulnerable in our neighborhood? How can we continue with our missions and visions so that our existence continues to be "for others"?

Isaiah encountered the Holy and foresaw a catastrophe in Judah. He also undertook to confront his people with that. Do we have a message of ours? Isaiah's message was "Though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste." Is the parable of the mustard seed ours? "Like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its

shade." (Mk 4:31-32) The contemporary situations would help us see our faith transformation clearer than before. Don't be limited by our perspectives. Let its results surprise us, as an individual and as an organization. Amen.