

The Message becomes the Messenger

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Preacher: Peter Dickson

[0 : 00] Well, let's turn to God's Word together. Our Bible reading this morning is in the book of Isaiah, and we're going to read from chapter 6. Isaiah chapter 6, reading the whole chapter.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings, with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying, and they were calling to one another, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. The whole earth is full of his glory. At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook, and the temple was filled with smoke. Woe to me, I cried, I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, See, this has touched your lips. Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? And I said, Here am I. Send me. He said, Go and tell this people, Be ever hearing, but never understanding. Be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused. Make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. Then I said, For how long, O Lord?

And he answered, Until the cities lie ruined and without inhabitant, until the houses are left deserted and the fields ruined and ravaged, until the Lord has sent everyone far away and the land is utterly forsaken. And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leaves stumps, when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land.

[2 : 59] Amen. May God help us to receive and understand and respond to his word. Let's turn then again to Isaiah chapter 6. Willie Lahore was a farmer's son who grew up near me, and he was about six years older than me. Willie, his friends used to say to him when they had been overtaken by him on his motorbike at about 90 miles an hour, You're going to kill yourself one of these days on that machine. You were so fast the other day, I never even saw you coming up behind me. You're a fool.

Local farmers and neighbours and family and friends used to shake their heads and say to one another, How can we get through to him? He was only 19. What's going to make him listen? What's it going to take to make him see sense and slow down? You try speaking to him, as parents used to say, because I can't get through. I've told him until I'm blue in the face. You may as well speak to the wall.

What does it take to get God's word through to human minds and to touch and change our human hearts?

Like all God's people in every generation, we can be so proud and so stubborn and so resistant and suspicious towards the Lord who loves us. We feign deafness and pretend that God's voice is perhaps not as important as we know it is. And so we go on living our Christian lives so often in that way.

[4 : 52] Now, in the book of Isaiah, God's city, his entire family, had become a denial of all that God stood for. God's people and the very fabric of the city, the fabric of its life, had become a denial of the living God who had rescued his people. His own people had descended into idolatry and into social wickedness.

What is evil in the time of Isaiah had become known as what is good, and what is good had become known as evil or worthless? And so the Lord's people had become a topsy-turvy nation and had tipped everything upside down as they consistently and increasingly rejected God's laws, spurned his words, and turned away from his voice. And God in his love for them, at the time Isaiah is

writing, is white hot with righteous anger. So the question is, what could get through to them? What could make them listen or see sense? What is it going to take to bring about a change of heart? And the answer in chapter 6, which as a chapter forms a vital conclusion to Isaiah's introduction to his prophecy, is that the only possibility of the voice of God getting through to these people is that the message from God becomes the messenger of God. So here in chapter 6, we have this intensely personal account from Isaiah himself of what happened to him as he became God's appointed prophet to God's rebellious people.

Whenever we read the prophecies in the Old Testament, we're naturally reading them as God's words given to God's people.

But of course, we have to deliberately remember that God's words were delivered through God's prophets to God's people.

[7 : 29] They were delivered through real human beings who, in their own day and generation, had to stand up before real human beings and speak God's words on his behalf.

And what God is always doing in this pattern of Old Testament prophecy, Hosea, for example, is another very, very striking example of this.

What God is always doing is making his prophets people of absolute integrity in that the words that they speak are in line with, or if you like, made flesh in, the lives that the prophets live.

The words of the prophets are always backed up. Sometimes, in the most extraordinary way in the Old Testament, the words of the prophets are always backed up by the lives and the circumstances of the prophets' lives.

And so the message becomes the messenger, or the messenger becomes, in a living, embodied sense, the message, whichever way around you like to put it.

[8 : 55] So in chapter 6, as we are given this insight into Isaiah's experience, we have to realize, and it's somewhat sobering to do so, that Isaiah himself was also under God's wrath and judgment.

He was not somehow an outsider. He was part of the whole city that had denied the living God. When good King Uzziah died, he says, Isaiah was that very year, when that happened, given a vision, a vision of God himself.

When the good King died, because King Uzziah was a good King, the nation had lost its leader. And when the nation lost its good leader, so at that point the nation was then set to go from bad to worse, and to even worse.

But at that time, Isaiah saw the Lord. We may initially think that such an exciting and spectacular vision gave the prophet an unforgettably wonderful experience.

[10 : 16] After all, he has given a glimpse of heaven itself. He's given the very thing that so many human hearts long for. He hears the song of the angels as he looks at the seraphs and their wings.

This vision is enough to inspire the finest art and music, and the words of that song of the angels are used all these centuries later in countless thousands of Christian services of worship.

This very day, all over the world, as the Lord's people worship, this same God. But Isaiah's vision for all its glorious splendor and heavenly beauty was not really unforgettably wonderful.

It was unforgettably frightening. For the vision was not about giving Isaiah an experience to excite him.

The vision was about giving Isaiah a heart that would prepare him for an unutterably difficult task that would only be humanly possible for him to actually become, in his own being and life, the very message of God as well as the messenger of God.

[11 : 45] Here in this stunning vision, as Isaiah encounters the living God himself, what he encounters is, as we were singing, the holiest of all holy beings.

He encounters, even in seeing the train, the edge of the robe of God, filling the temple. Even in that, he encounters enough of God's purity for him to see, without even having to pause to think about it, his own sinfulness.

This is like a nightmare. Isaiah is like a man who is queuing up to get his CBE and realizing suddenly that he is wearing stinking, filthy rags in the presence of the Queen.

Or a person suddenly realizing that they are standing naked and exposed in a busy department store with hundreds watching. And yet, Isaiah was not about to wake up in his bed with a jolt, as we sometimes do, thankful.

Oh, it was just a dream. For Isaiah, this was not dream of human imagination. This was vision given by God himself in all its reality.

[13 : 09] And when we human beings begin to see even something of the purity and holiness of Almighty God, we de facto, at the same time, see something of our own sinfulness for what it really is.

And we do not rejoice to be in God's presence when that happens. We automatically want to hide. Remember Adam and Eve in the garden.

Verse 5 says it all, doesn't it? Woe to me, I cried, I'm ruined. I'm a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.

And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty. Of course, it wasn't only Isaiah's lips which were unclean, but with those very lips, he was to speak God's words.

And how would he do so when he knows fully well that from his heart, from his sinful heart, and up over his voice box, and out of those lips come all sorts of sinful words.

[14 : 39] How can I speak God's words? The message from God, if it was going to come from his lips and heart, was going to have to become the messenger of God, if it was to get through to the people in that city.

How is it possible to get through, to get the gospel through to a proud man? How is it possible to get the gospel through, to somebody who knows me well and has known me all my life?

How is it possible to get the gospel through to such a person? Well, it will have to be a man who has been humbled out of his pride, who speaks to the proud man.

How can you connect with the 19-year-old who drives his motorbike at 90 miles per hour? Well, you go and find another 19-year-old who is a paraplegic, following a motorbike accident, to speak to him.

That's how. How can God get through to people in this world who have thrown his love back in his face? People who have gone running after money of all stupid things instead of the Lord himself.

[16 : 14] People who have had an affair with their idols and slapped God in the face repeatedly with their persistent abuse and hatred towards others around them.

The very human beings who are made in God's image. How can God ever reach out to a world like ours through people like us?

How was God ever going to connect with Israel? Such as it was. Bad and getting worse, and the good king was dead. Well, he would need a prophet who knew that he was every bit as rotten as the people to whom he spoke.

A prophet who would hide himself given even a glimpse of the glory of God. A man who would never, ever speak with even so much as a hint of personal superiority.

And so the chapter goes on to tell us that having come to an end of himself, having been unraveled and despairing before the glory of God's holiness and almost driven out of his own mind by his own sinfulness, what then happens?

[17 : 29] It's a wonderful thing. It's the most wonderful thing in the world. What happens next? Here is gospel.

My wife and I were recently in Cambodia and we went to visit the only tourist attraction in Cambodia that I know of.

Maybe you've been there. Angkor Wat, the world's biggest religious building. My guess is that St. Paul's Cathedral would be about 2% of the size of this place.

And again and again as we toured around, there were these steep, steep concrete steps, stone steps, going up and up and up and up to a shrine.

It was a world of human religion where people thought, as all religious human beings do, that you have to climb up some kind of steep stair to somehow maybe get to the God at the top.

[18 : 46] If you make it, you might get there. You might please the God who is there in the shrine. What happens next in Isaiah chapter 6?

What does the living God do? He takes the initiative. Here is salvation. Here is a world apart from all human religion.

God comes down and deals with Isaiah's sin himself. A live coal is brought from the altar.

And with its searing heat, it is used, if you will, to cauterize his lips, to cleanse those lips that will speak for the Lord.

From the altar of God's temple, from the shrine, from the high place, comes cleansing for Isaiah.

[19 : 49] Not a voice saying, climb higher, Isaiah. It's steep. You may make it if you put in more effort. But a coal coming and brought to burn Isaiah's lips.

He is reassured. Your guilt is taken away. Your sin, of which you are so terribly conscious, is atoned for.

And then Isaiah is ready to serve. Now he can speak and live as God's prophet with integrity. After this day, would Isaiah ever stand before the people proud of his own achievements?

Never. Will Isaiah lord it over the people in that city as spiritually superior? Not even for a moment. Would Isaiah, after this experience, stand up at the temple like a hypocrite, wagging his finger and shaking his fist at sinful Israel?

No. Because the memory of his indelibly scarred lips would forever and ever remind him that he lives for this God not because of what he had offered to God by way of gift or brain or stamina or sacrifice, but because this holy God had cleansed him from his sin in his mercy.

[21 : 20] And so it was that right then and there at that moment Isaiah hears the voice of the Lord saying, whom shall I send who will go for us?

And then Isaiah can say with his burnt lips, here am I, send me. And God said, go and tell this people, go, Isaiah, like a paraplegic from your wheelchair and look them straight in the eyes and say to them, go on then, Willie, you keep driving like a lunatic.

You keep the speed up and keep ignoring the words of the people who love you most. Fine, don't listen to them and you have it your own way until you end it all like a foolhardy macho who will not believe that your bones will break and your heart could ever stop.

And Isaiah, knowing that he must speak with that kind of tone, asks the very next obvious question, doesn't he?

Verse 10, if I must preach like this, for how long, O Lord, must I do it? And God says to him, just keep saying it.

[22 : 57] Keep saying it, Isaiah, until there is no one left in the cities, until you wander the streets like a solitary madman, verses 11 and 12 and 13.

Keep saying it as you see hundreds and hundreds disappearing off into exile. Keep speaking these words. Keep speaking from your scarred lips until even a tenth of the people are left.

And even then, the land will be laid to waste. Keep speaking, Isaiah, until the forest becomes a hillside of ragged, raw stumps where there used to be a beautiful woodland.

And then, and only then, and eventually, will a holy seed begin to bring a glimmer of hope to this people.

So, do you and I this morning begin to hear what God is saying to us through Isaiah's experience?

Do you begin to see how God can speak effectively in a world like ours, a world which ignores him and hates him and would get rid of him and destroy him if it could, although it can't, a world which exchanges the love of this God for idols, a world which attacks God's word and rips it up in his face and flaunts the fact that they do so with the scoffing laughter of a playground bully?

[24 : 42] Do you see it? If we can see it, this chapter will be our salvation from endless distraction and endless speculation about answering this question, what could possibly make people listen to God's word?

How can we get people to hear the gospel? How can we get Christians who are wandering away from the Lord who loves them, reconnect with Christ?

How could we ever get a wandering church to come back to its senses? How can we impress on people we love just how serious a thing it is to flaunt God's word?

How can we do that in our families and in our streets and across our desks? Think of John the Baptist and his camel hair clothes and his life of wandering in the desert, the final prophet before the Lord Jesus came.

And think of Jesus himself, the true prophet of God, the ultimate voice. And what was John the Baptist and what was Jesus?

[26 : 02] Jesus had no place to lay his head. He sent the religious away with a flea in their ear but was surrounded by children and sinners and lepers and tax collectors, the lost and the sinful and those he came to reach.

The king of kings who made the planets by the very power of his word and who had ruled the universe from an ageless eternity until he stepped down into this world and then became him in his very life a nothing, a no one and died like a common criminal, the message from God becoming the messenger and the messenger becoming the message.

It's just exactly the same, isn't it, with the twelve apostles in the New Testament who didn't have very much at all between them in worldly terms, certainly not much money and not much success even as disciples when Jesus was with them.

By the time Jesus was dying on the cross, they were all running away from him and disowning him publicly. A few months later, did these twelve men stand up in market places and towns across the known world as the gospel began to spread?

Did they stand up full of a sense of their own importance, convinced of their own gifting as the Lord's apostles? Did they claim success as they lived each day for the Lord Jesus?

[27 : 51] No. But they knew they were forgiven men. They knew that they had been stood like those stripped naked before the throne of a holy God wanting to hide in shame.

They knew that the Lord Jesus Christ had died and had risen, and that was their news and their gospel. And they knew, all twelve of them, that Christ had called them weak, broken, sinful, though they be.

they knew, utterly and completely they knew, that their guilt had been removed. Isaiah knew that, and their sin had been atoned for, and that is all they ever needed to know.

It is the only qualification required to live for the Lord Jesus Christ. Willie Lahore died, just as everybody said he might, on his motorbike, careering down the same road at top speed that he passed so many people on before.

And he'd heard the warnings over and over and over again, and so there was a day when he heard the warning from somebody for the very last time, and then he died.

[29 : 34] He would not listen. It's a serious thing to hear God's Word. It's a serious thing to read God's Word.

It's serious because the words are the words from the one who loves us perfectly and knows us best. It's serious because God knows what we need to hear, and we are always in this fallen world capable of ignoring Him.

It's serious because every single time we hear God's Word, it could quite easily be the last time that a human being hears it. It's serious for any human being to hear God's Word because it's possible to ignore Him for too long and leave the business of listening until it is just too late.

It's serious because His love is so great. It's serious because His longing to bring life is born out of the gift of His only Son.

It's serious because God has done everything that He ever needs to do in order for His words to get through to us. And so the door is permanently open for people to walk right into His presence.

[30 : 57] And we human beings would be fools, fools like that 19-year-old not to listen and not to walk through that door.

It's serious because we have far, far more than Isaiah's vision from chapter 6. We have far more glory to see than He saw.

We have far more insight than He had. We have more than the reality of Isaiah's experience of a long time speaking and being ignored by those who thought they knew better.

We have far more to go on. We have far more reason to listen than those who heard Isaiah speak, although they had every reason to listen.

Today, human beings have far more reason to listen because we have the full New Testament gospel and we have the risen Lord Jesus Himself.

[32 : 02] We do not have a seraph flying, vision-like from heaven with a coal from the altar to touch our lips. It's often what people want, isn't it? But we have better.

We have more. We don't have an angel flying towards us. We have the Holy Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ Himself willing, can you imagine this, willing not only to touch our lips, sinful though they are, but to dwell in our hearts and to cleanse somebody like me for good and forever.

we have better than a temple to gaze at. We have a cross standing empty and towering over the wrecks of time.

We have better than cherubim. We have the saints of Almighty God throughout the world to witness to His glory.

glory. We have better than all the angelic beings that fill the glory of heaven itself, for we have a knowledge of the redeemed of heaven, some of whom you have known personally.

[33 : 29] People whose lives have become, in your own experience, so integrated with the message of a crucified Savior, that you have known, known even beyond the shadow of a doubt,

that this person is a believer of integrity, who has become this message incarnated in their life and circumstances.

You and I have believers, whether in heaven or on earth, who are, as we say nowadays, the real deal, believers who have become the message of self-sacrificing, costly love towards us, which is the message of God.

You think, you think of the most humble Christian sinner who has had most impact on you, the person who has taught you most, loved you most deeply, forgiven you most for the sake of Jesus Christ.

You think of that person, and do you admire them because you know they were sinless, gifted, skilled in some way or another?

Do you love their love for Jesus Christ because they have mustered it up out of their own strength and climbed the stone steps up towards the shrine?

[35 : 04] No, you do not. You love them and thank God for them because they have humbly loved you despite your sin, because they are the person or the people who have always said to you that the only thing they can offer is what Christ has done for them.

You love them, them, or remember them, because you know that they knew just how weak they are, and that Christ is strong.

You love them because they do not stand out, but because they are people who enable Jesus to stand out. you love them because they never stand over you, but always alongside you, as Isaiah would have to do.

Where there is an Isaiah, there is hope, even if it be distant and seed-like, even if all seems desolate, even if the whole world and the whole church seems to have gone mad in its rebellion, where even one lives and speaks, having become in their heart and life the message of God, there is hope, there is gospel seed, and God alone knows how lightweight we are capable of making him seen in the church in 21st century Western society, but when even one takes him seriously, then there is hope.

And so we read Isaiah 6, and we find ourselves like Isaiah, not that we are Old Testament prophets, but like Isaiah, saying, well, Lord, here we are, not just in your presence, but filled by your spirit.

[37 : 17] Here we are. We find ourselves like Isaiah, saying, search us, Lord, and cleanse us, and send us.

And if you are to do that, Lord, once again, as you did with Isaiah, you take the initiative, and take it with people like us.

And he does. Amen. Let's pray. We rest, O God, our Father, in the knowledge of the wonder of this gospel.

we rejoice together in the reality of your patience. We bear before you in wonder, because in your wisdom you are able and willing not only to burn our lips, but to change and alter every circumstance and aspect of our lives, that we might speak to others as those who have been forgiven, those who have known what it is to be cleansed by your Son through his blood.

So, Lord, this day, whether we have done so many times or whether we have never, ever done so before, we bear before you, acknowledging that serving you is not about us, not about what we are, but what you do through us, in love for us and in love for those we serve.

[39 : 22] Hear us, Lord, as we respond in our hearts. Hear us, Lord, as we feed on your word.

Hear us, Lord, as we worship you afresh and sing your praise for your Son died and is risen.

And so, as we sing to his name, be all the glory forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.