

Isaiah 6:1-8 Bill Uetricht 5 Epiphany 2.6.25

I generally don't start my sermon with some deep, profound question or some lofty reflection. Most of the time, I like to begin with something light that will attract your attention, while you are getting settled in or are paying attention to the movement in the sanctuary. Today I am feeling quite serious. And so, I ask a heavy question. How do we discern reality? How do we figure out what is really real?

Well, you might say in Philosophy 101 with Bill, you look around. You use your senses. You utilize your eyes and your ears. You might even measure things. You might test kids or adults. You look at the facts on the ground. And then you will be able to conclude what is really real.

One of the criticisms of us religious people is that we tend not to look at the facts on the ground, that somehow our minds are disconnected from reality. Our minds and hearts are said to be somewhere in the ether land, floating in some unreal never-never land.

You might come to that conclusion when you read or hear the prophet Isaiah's description of his calling. It's somewhat of a bizarre story. He says that this calling happened in the year that King Uzziah died, which means during a time of a national crisis. Uzziah had been a stable king. Now things were looking pretty messy. It's in the midst of the messiness that Isaiah has this wild vision of God sitting on a throne, above everything, "high and lofty." In the vision, Isaiah gets to see the lower half of God. He is overwhelmed by the size of God's robe. The hem of the robe is so large that it fills the massive temple.

Around God are these seraphim—fiery flying snake angels. (Oh, that's really real, isn't it?) These flying snake angels have six wings: two with which they cover their faces (no one can really look at God); two with which they cover their private parts (when you see God you want to be a little modest); and two with which they flew.

And as they fly, they sing back and forth to each other, “Holy, Holy, Holy is God. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Interestingly, even the angels of heaven aren’t preoccupied with heaven. They see God’s glory writ large on each continent, each sea, each tree, and I’ll bet, each person.

As the fiery, flying snakes sing, the temple shakes and is filled with smoke. And Isaiah is gob smacked. “Wow!” he cries out. “Woe is me. I am in way over my head. I am lost. Let’s face it. I’m small when compared to God. And moreover, I am man of unclean lips. You want me to talk with my lips, but my lips have been used for a lot of junk. And what’s more, the people who surround me have some really dirty lips as well. We’re all really sinful.”

And then, one of these fiery, flying snakes takes a burning coal—again this is sounding really real, isn’t it?—and touches my lips with it. And the snake talks: “With this burning coal your lips are purified. Your excuses are over. Your guilt has departed you, and your sin has been blotted out!”

And I, Isaiah said, “Holy Toledo. Holy mackerel. Holy ravioli, batman! Holy socks! I am out of my league, but I can’t help myself. I am hearing a call. I am volunteering for the job. Push send. Send me!”

Now do you see what I mean about religion? It can feel really out of touch with reality. Isaiah seems to be lost in the ether land. He seems to be out of touch with what we know as reality. Most of us don’t deal with fiery, flying snakes. Most of us don’t experience the pivots of the church building shaking. Obviously, this isn’t the really real.

Wait a minute, the Bible wants to say. You have a limited imagination as to what is really real. The really real can’t always be measured. The really real can’t always be captured by our rational minds. We sometimes think that the really real is simply what we create, what life as we live it looks like. When people say, “There’s an

alternative to war,” we say, “But that is not realistic.” When someone says, “Money doesn’t have to run everything,” we often respond, “In the real world it does.” But you see, the role of religion is to announce that there is another real world. And sometimes what religion does is to use crazy language and images to help us know that other real world.

That is what is going on in Isaiah. The prophet has experienced another real world. And that real world is one that takes with utmost seriousness something big, grand, and even a bit scary. This something big makes you feel small sometimes. This something big puts your life in some kind of perspective. This something big makes your self-preoccupation seem a little silly. This something big you cannot look at directly, but you know is real nonetheless, as you experience the overwhelming largeness of Lake Michigan and the insights of science about the age of the universe and the size of the cosmos. This something big fascinates you and at the same time makes you tremble a bit. This something big makes you recognize that you are messed up, that you are men and women of unclean lips, that you are sinners.

But the experience of the something big doesn’t stop with the reality of your deficits. Something bigger than your deficits keeps calling your name, keeps moving you beyond all of your excuses. “I’m too messed up. I’m too small. I’m too shy. I come from a dysfunctional family. I’ve done some really stupid things. Ya. Ya. Ya. But the voice of the really big speaks, a voice you have heard, a voice that won’t put up with your excuses. You know that this voice is really real. Oh, I understand. Sometimes that that voice is mixed with your opinions or the thoughts your family or culture or political party put in your brain. There is no doubt that you have to do some work to discern what voice you are hearing. But nonetheless, you *know* the voice; you’ve heard it. You grasp that it is speaking not just to human beings in general, but to

you in particular. And it's worth your while to respond to the voice, to volunteer, to raise your hand and say, "Send me."

Yes, responding to this big voice will take you to a different real world. And I must clue you in on something. People won't always receive you well when you listen to the big voice. Actually, when you look at what follows our text from Isaiah today you experience a warning from God to Isaiah that folks won't listen to him. But he is being told, go, nonetheless.

The voice of the really big is calling him, in spite of the reality that folks won't receive him. It's a different world that he knows and is to trust. When you respond to the voice of the really big, life will look more like love and compassion than measuring and counting. The really big, the really real--and the life of Jesus tells us this--is the bigness, the reality of love. It's love that is unsettling you. It is love that is calling you. It's love that will make you uncomfortable with how the world defines the really real. The world is preoccupied with money, power, popularity, poll numbers, test scores, fitting in, succeeding. The world sometimes only sees the so-called facts on the ground. The world's definition of what is really real *really* is quite small.

But the really real is much bigger than our smallness, much bigger than our puny definitions of what is truly true, much bigger than even the so-called facts on the ground.

You and I are living in tough times. Whether the facts on the ground are personal, national, or global, they seem quite grim. The voices that are calling us, that are shouting at us 24 hours a day, don't seem to be taking us to something grand or noble. In fact, they seem to be dousing us with fear and anxiety. Is there something more real than the anxiety and fear? Is there something more real than the anger or the despair? Is there a voice calling us to something grand, something good, something right?

Isaiah is convinced that there is. It's the voice of God. For Isaiah, this voice is really real. This voice, God, is calling us to love and hope. This voice is the voice of the really big that spoke to Jesus and told him to get out of the grave. This voice was heard by Peter and the twelve, 500 brothers and sisters, and even by the really messed up man, Paul. This voice keeps calling us. Don't give up. Hear the voice. Respond and be sent by love and hope for the sake of love and hope.