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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia  
 May 27, 2018

### Psalm 29

- <sup>1</sup> Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.  
<sup>2</sup> Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name; worship the LORD in holy splendor.  
<sup>3</sup> The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD, over mighty waters.  
<sup>4</sup> The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty.  
<sup>5</sup> The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon.  
<sup>6</sup> He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox.  
<sup>7</sup> The voice of the LORD flashes forth flames of fire.  
<sup>8</sup> The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.  
<sup>9</sup> The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!"  
<sup>10</sup> The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.  
<sup>11</sup> May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!

### Isaiah 6: 1 - 8

<sup>1</sup>In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."

<sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup>And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

<sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." <sup>8</sup>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!"

The year Uzziah died would have been a memorable year.<sup>1</sup>

A year known to the people.

Uzziah became king when he was 16 years old and reigned for 52 years. He died around 742 B.C.E.. Before the Common Era.

His reign was remembered as a good reign.

There was strength and building and good farming of the land.

He "loved the soil." (2 Chron.26:6-15)

His *first* prophet was Ezekiel, and according to Ezekiel,

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<sup>1</sup> Huge props to the Rev. Rebecca Gillespie Messman for writing a paper for the lectionary study group "The Well," on this text from Isaiah for our gathering in Birmingham in 2016. I have relied on much of her research for this sermon as well as David L. Petersen, Old Testament Editor, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39" by Gene M. Tucker [Nashville: Abingdon Press] 2001, pages 100 - 105.

Uzziah “did what was right in the sight of the Lord.”

But, like so many characters in the Bible,  
 doing right some of the time isn't the same as doing right all of the time.  
 Pride and excess brought him down.  
 Uzziah entered the temple, trying to offer his own sacrifices and burn his own incense on the altar. Kings weren't supposed to meddle in the realm of the Gods.  
 Eighty priests rushed to try and stop him, but they were too late.  
 According to Josephus, a huge earthquake shook the temple,  
 and Uzziah broke out in leprosy on his forehead.  
 He lived the rest of his life in a separate house while his son Jotham took over.  
 He was buried in the field of outside of the city, rather than in the Kings' Tomb in Jerusalem.  
 His legacy was boiled down to four words: “He was a leper.”

But, though imperfect in life,  
 Uzziah's death lead to a time of greater chaos for Judah.  
 The neighboring Assyrians were seizing territory,  
 and kings who followed Uzziah would be unable to bring  
 the kind of peace and prosperity  
 that characterized the Uzziah years,  
 which were probably remembered as “the good ole days.”

So, the year Uzziah died was significant.  
 And the people remembered things like that.  
 We remember things like that.

1776

In the Presbyterian Church: 1983

(as you'll read about in the newsletter that's coming out this week.)

9/11.

We, too, are a people who mark time by significant happenings.

Maybe you or your family have those dates, too.  
 Mile markers in your life that help you identify what happened when.  
 Births. Deaths. Graduations.

So, the year King Uzziah died is something known.  
 Understood.  
 As is what happened next.

God calls Isaiah to be a prophet. And Isaiah sees the Lord in the inner room of the temple,  
 and it is a memorable scene.  
 We're not totally sure what seraphs were, most strictly translated they are “fiery ones,”  
 but their purpose in the text is clear, to glorify God.  
 Pivots shook, the place filled with smoke.  
 Remember what happened when Uzziah broke the rules? The earth shook.  
 This was a sign for Isaiah, and the people listening, of the presence of God.

Isaiah confesses his sin, and he is purified by a coal to the lips.  
 Mouth purification rituals were common in Ancient Near Eastern tradition  
 for thousands of years before Isaiah's experience.  
 It cleansed the priest and allowed him to speak a pure word-  
 why confession and absolution are a part of what happens here.

The coal itself is, in fact, considered to **be** the prophetic word. (Isaiah 5:24, Jer. 5:14, Ezek. 20:47)  
 It's the fire in the belly of the prophet.

And so, Isaiah is called. Or, not so much called, as led to volunteer.  
 With the seraphs and the fire and the shaking and the coal.  
 God volun-told him.

What is Isaiah being called to?  
 It's not a glorious road ahead, but one of hard work.  
 Where people don't want to listen.  
 Where they often turn away. From Isaiah and from God.

But it's God's work, and it's God's work for Isaiah.  
 The fire is in his belly, upon his lips, and it will not go away.

I wish we could say that everyone has such a dramatic calling.  
 Smoke and seraphs and such.  
 It doesn't work that way, of course, but we do all have a calling.  
 Throughout our lives likely multiple callings, to do God's work.

An entire class graduated from high school yesterday.  
 And from the West Virginia School of Osteopathic Medicine.  
 They have callings.  
 And sometimes significant moments that invite a group of people to consider  
 where they are and where they are going can encourage us all to do the same.  
 To remember that God has hopes for us.  
 God has plans for us, if we will but listen.

And sometimes it is for work that is large and known.  
 Some people have big and known callings.  
 On this Memorial Day weekend, when we remember and honor people who gave their lives in  
 service to this nation, I cannot help but think about Abraham Lincoln.  
 Whose life was one of service, but not, maybe a little bit like Isaiah,  
 not one of universal admiration.  
 Who said, on the battlefield at Gettysburg, these words:  
*We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who  
 here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we  
 should do this.*

*But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain.*

These dead shall not have died in vain,  
 a reminder that we should not allow violence and war to be acceptable or the status quo.  
 That there is a better way.  
 Some people are called to be Abraham Lincoln's of the world. Isaiahs.

But that's not all of us, is it?  
 What about the rest of us? The "more of us."  
 We are still called, but most of the time those callings won't be celebrated by the world.  
 They are **all** work, and require faith, sacrifice, and devotion.  
 Sometimes those callings are surprises.  
 Sometimes those callings are things we thought we didn't want,  
 and sometimes that's exactly how we know they are of God.

Which makes me think about the story of Sarah Thebarger.

Diagnosed with breast cancer at age 27, Sarah Thebarger's life was sent into a tailspin. She was no stranger to struggle, she had fought her fundamental Christian upbringing for the right to pursue what she perceived to be God's call for her- education and a career.

An amazing woman, she was able to defy her upbringing to follow God's call while still being relationship with her family, and a faith community.

But, just when her life was all falling into place, she received the first of a series of cancer diagnoses, which led to years of grueling treatment and near fatal diseases that resulted from the treatment. She fell away from the church. She saw her fiancé drift away; her friends fail to have the stamina for her marathon length illnesses. And so she left. Left the East Coast one week after she was discharged from the hospital and moved to Portland Oregon, to try and find if she could uncover a life worth living.

After working at this task for more than a year, she had the chance to return to the East Coast to interview for her dream job. In her own words, from her (in my opinion, amazing) memoir entitled The Invisible Girls<sup>2</sup>

*The breast surgeon explained that my job would be to coordinate patients' care and organize multimillion-dollar fund-raising events attended by socialites in Manhattan and Greenwich. It was an incredible opportunity. But on the train ride back from Connecticut to my hotel, I leaned my head against the window and sighed. If this job was so perfect, if it was the key to getting my derailed life back on track, why did I feel so awful inside?*

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Thebarger, The Invisible Girls: A Memoir (Jericho Books, Kindle Version.: April 16, 2013) pages 236-237.

*I flew back to Portland, and a week later got the call from the breast cancer center offering me the job. I told them I needed to think about it. And then I sat down on the couch and cried. And then I fell to my knees. And then I lay face down on the carpet in my living room, and I wept some more.*

*It was the perfect job, but I was too broken to take it. I was too fragile to leave Portland. I was too devastated by what had happened on the East Coast to move back—at least for a long, long time.*

*I realized as I was lying there on the carpet that I had two choices. I could have the life I'd always planned—the multiple Ivy League degrees, the Manhattan apartment, the swanky job with the multi-millionaire clients, and the high-profile writing career—but I would lose my soul.*

*Or I could stay in Portland and work with drunk and high patients in the ER at a hospital no one had ever heard of, write essays for online magazines with small readerships, slip anonymously into church and cry with exhaustion and relief during the hymns, and continue to reconnect with God and with myself.*

*Making the choice about the job opportunity was agonizing, so while I considered my decision, I did what soothes me most: I took an hour-long bubble bath. I prayed the whole time that God would help me make the right choice, and give me the grace to live with the repercussions of whatever path He led me down.*

*The water was cold when I finally decided I would turn down the job, leave Columbia, stay in Portland, and anonymously experience the restoration of my body and my soul.*

*I sank down, with just my nose about the water so I could breathe. And I prayed, **“God I always thought I was going to be the beautiful fragrant rose that bloomed for You in the middle of a prominent centerpiece. But now I see that I may only ever be a crocus in the corner of Your garden.”***

*My tears flowed faster and faster into the bathwater, like rivers rushing toward the sea.*

***“And I just want to tell You if that’s what You have planned for me, if I am meant to be an obscure flower in the corner of the expansive garden, I will live there and I will love You and I will bloom just for You—only, always, ever.”***

*When I came up from the water, I was clean. And I was surrendered.*

Friends, we are all called. The task isn't figuring out that. The task is figuring out where we are called, how we are a part of creating the world of God's kingdom, a kingdom of neighbor-loving peace and justice, plenty for all, and living into it with our full selves.

*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!”*

May we all know, pray for, and receive such surrender.