



# Commitment to change

ISAIAH 6:1-13



## Opening

We worship a holy God. Reflect on how God’s holiness impacts your faith. Sing or read a hymn, such as “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,” number 120 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (Scottsdale, Pa: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992) or “Santo, Santo, Santo,” number 400 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

## Understanding God’s Word

A prophetic call story seems important for each of the major prophets, as it is for numerous leaders of Israel, including Abraham (Genesis 12), Moses (Exodus 3 and 6), and Samuel (1 Samuel 3). Jeremiah 1 recounts his sense of being called even before his birth. Ezekiel 1 is an elaborate attempt to describe the appearance of an indescribable revelation of the Lord. Isaiah’s call narrative in Isaiah 6 corresponds to Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s and those of other great people of God.

The prophet Isaiah was active from 742 to about 701 BC. Thus Isaiah served before and after the fall of the Northern Kingdom to the Assyrians in 722 BC. And he is still around when the Assyrians almost take Jerusalem in 701 BC after capturing all of the other walled cities of Judah. This historical-political background helps stress that the task of the messenger is a difficult



## For the leader

1. Bring artistic images which represent God or holiness and place them around the room, or light a candle or lamp in the room.
2. Ask someone to read Isaiah 6. Invite everyone else to listen for what stands out to them. What words or images grab their attention? Share briefly around the circle.

one with an unpleasant word to deliver. Experiencing the awesome presence of Yahweh is so overwhelming that Isaiah is moved to volunteer for service, barely realizing the difficulties.

## Connecting with God's Word

### “Seeing” God

Isaiah sees the Lord, Adonai, and goes on to describe what he sees. How do you describe an experience for which ordinary words and normal human categories are inadequate? Any attempt to sketch or paint such an appearance of God, including the ones in Ezekiel 1 and 10 and Revelation 4, will come up short. What are we to make of these living creatures with wings, faces, and eyes?

There are elements in Isaiah 6—fire, smoke, shaking, a voice, perhaps thunder, and bright light—that connect with Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19), the dedications of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40) and Temple (2 Chronicles 7), or even Pentecost (Acts 2) and Paul's conversion (Acts 9). We search for language and images from our ordinary experiences, but here they fail us. The essential matter is that Isaiah encountered God, that Isaiah received a glimpse of God's glory.

The seraphs, *seraphim* in Hebrew, are presented as ministering beings around or above the Lord. The Hebrew scriptures occasionally mention Yahweh's council or court as in Psalm 82:1, 89:7, 1 Kings 22:19-22, and Jeremiah 23:18. Did God's people borrow this picture from the Canaanite pantheon and its assembly of the gods known from Ugarit in 14th-century BC northern Syria in order to describe their heavenly reality? There, El sits as father of the gods. The Hebrew *Yahweh Sabaoth*, is often translated as “the Lord of hosts.” The hosts are often explained as God's armies or angels, and are perhaps a dim reflection of the lesser gods surrounding El of the Canaanites.

Using the words “holy, holy, holy” three times is a way to call God superlatively most holy. At this pronouncement, the building shook and the place filled with smoke—more power and mystery.

- Recall times when you had a dream that was almost impossible to put into words. Have you experienced God's awesome holiness, or power, in ways difficult to describe?
- This image of God on a throne surrounded by courtiers seems to compare God to the powerful rulers of that time. How is God like these rulers and how is God different? What kind of power does God have and how does God use it?

- What images of God are common in our culture? What do they convey about God’s power? How do they challenge the “ruling powers” of our time?

### ***Feeling unclean***

An overwhelmed Isaiah confesses his own unworthiness and uncleanness in the presence of this holy God. Isaiah feels inadequate before the Lord of hosts, “LORD Almighty” (NIV). In Isaiah’s state of unworthiness a seraph purifies him with a burning coal, removes his guilt, and atones for his sin. With special attention to mouth and lips, the seraph is already preparing Isaiah for his mission of communication, even before he volunteers.

- When do you experience a sense of unworthiness?
- Why is speech (clean lips) so important? Where do you long for truth to be spoken and heard in our homes, communities, and nations?
- Read Matthew 13:13-17. How does Jesus’ life and teaching help us to see and hear who God is and what God is saying to us?

### ***Commitment to God***

Yahweh said, “Who will go?” Isaiah said, “Send me” (6:8). The question becomes, “Who will go for us?” The “us” may refer to the seraphs-hosts-angels-lesser gods surrounding Yahweh. The “us” may also connect to the “plural of majesty.” In 6:1, “Lord” in lower case letters is Adonai, which can mean literally “my lords.”

In such a grand setting, how can Isaiah not willingly fit into God’s program? “Here am I” is a typical obedient response when God calls (Abraham, Genesis 22:1-11; Moses, Exodus 3:4; Samuel, 1 Samuel 3:4; Mary, Luke 1:38; and Ananias, Acts 9:10). “I hear you; you have my attention, and I am at your service,” is followed by the willing words, “Send me.”

- In what sense has God called you? How are you responding to God’s call on your life?
- What are the differences and similarities between a call to conversion and a call to special ministry and vocation? Can there be a special call for a specific task?

### **Closing**

Reflect on where God is present in your life. How might God be calling you? Pray for ears to hear and eyes to see.

## DEVOTIONALS

### Devotional 1

*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.*

—Isaiah 6:1

Can it really be? Isaiah is in the presence of the Creator of the universe, the One who strung all those stars in the sky—yet all he brings back is a fashion report?

Some might excuse Isaiah by saying that no words could convey the majesty of God. Also, these were turbulent times. A king had just died—one who had provided stability and remained faithful for a long time. Isaiah must have been unsettled and preoccupied.

Rather than criticize Isaiah, perhaps we should ask how we describe the people around us. Each one is made in the image of God. Each one gives us insight into God’s way of thinking, acting, and loving. Yet so often we condense our impressions of each precious human being into a report of clothing, hairstyle, shoes. Every human we encounter provides a chance to encounter the mystery of the eternal. How about taking a real good look? —Frank Ramirez

*Open my eyes, God of vision, that I might see with your eyes.*

### Devotional 2

*I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips . . . yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts.” —Isaiah 6:5*

I expect visions of God to be beautiful, awesome, and uplifting. Isaiah’s vision sounds like it was all of that, but it also over-

whelmed him; he felt utterly unworthy.

I once went to hear a performance of Mozart’s Requiem at the grandest cathedral in Seattle, prepared to be awed and moved. Yet we found ourselves sitting next to a sleeping, homeless man. I tried to be accepting, but instead became irritated as he continued sleeping.

When the music stopped, however, and the congregational responses began, the man sprang to his feet and recited the Latin liturgy from memory. When it came time to pass the peace, he shook our hands and welcomed us; we were visiting his church! I felt ashamed for misjudging this man, thinking he did not belong.

I expected to receive a lofty vision of God, but I also experienced Isaiah’s feeling, “Woe is me.” —Janet Toews Berg

*God, you called Isaiah after he expressed his shame. Please accept my shortcomings and show me something of yourself today.*

### Devotional 3

*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.” —Isaiah 6:5*

I was only 20 when a minister came to lead deeper-life services. People from all over town flocked to the church. The atmosphere was charged with an almost tangible sense of the Almighty’s presence.

What most caught my attention, however, was the action of the people. They got right with God as they responded with deep repentance. Even my parents, who

had worked in church planting for several decades, found a new level of relationship with their Lord.

This is the closest parallel to Isaiah's experience I have encountered. People felt like they had "unclean lips" because they were meeting the King. Yet, it was a time of renewal as they had an honest encounter with God.

A friend once suggested that true worship occurs when we tell the truth to God about ourselves. Telling the truth can have a wonderful releasing effect that can result in a deeper, closer walk with God.

—David Wiebe

*O God, I come to you as I am and commit myself to you. Cleanse me and make me fit for your service. Renew my spirit daily, and thank you for your love.*

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## Devotional 4

*The seraph touched my mouth . . . and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." —Isaiah 6:7*

During a church retreat, participants were asked to stop at several stations to remember the ways we had sinned against God and others. At each station we picked up a weight to place in a bag.

I like to think of myself as a good person, but the weight of my bag made me want to cry out like Isaiah, "Woe is me! I am lost . . ."

When we were finally able to drop our "sins" at the foot of the cross, what a sense of release swept over me! I wanted to tell everyone of the forgiveness and mercy I had received!

Isaiah encountered God's glory and immediately remembered his unworthi-

ness. Yet the holiness of God is not sullied by Isaiah's presence. Rather, it transforms Isaiah. He is set free from sin and guilt. This cleansing is also a commission; Isaiah is sent out to spread God's word among the people. —Matt Hamsher

*Thank you, God, for setting me free from my sin and guilt. Help me share your love and truth with others.*

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## Devotional 5

*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!" —Isaiah 6:8*

At times I feel overwhelmed when I see the needs of people all around me. How can God use me to make a difference?

Before Isaiah can do God's work, God has to equip him. Isaiah needs a fresh vision of God. Salvation is God's work. No need is too big for God. No person is too lost for God's love.

When Isaiah sees God's holiness he feels lost. Our response might be similar: "I haven't got what it takes. I am no better than the people who need my help."

Isaiah's confession leads to repentance and cleansing. Not by ceremonial washing, lengthy prayers, or painful penance. Isaiah's cleansing is God's work. God has the remedy for the sin and brokenness in us and others.

God calls us to be cleansed ourselves, then to tap into Christ, the source of our strength, and to tell and show forth God's salvation. —Helen Grace Lescheid

*God, cleanse me, fill me, and use me to show and tell people of your love today.*

## Devotional 6

*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!"*  
—Isaiah 6:8

What does it mean to be called by God? For years, I have been writing about my call to be a pastor. I am trying to understand where and when, like Isaiah, I heard God. What led me to quit my job as a public school teacher and move my young family across the country to attend seminary with no concrete plans?

Isaiah's call is different from my own call, but I recognize common themes. When I left teaching, I felt lost, as did Isaiah in his first encounter with God. But along the way, I did hear a call and like Isaiah, responded, "Yes!"

As you read about Isaiah's call, reflect on yours. Ask what God is inviting you to do and to learn in this phase of your life.

—Larry Hauder

*God of Isaiah, thank you for inviting me on a journey with you. Continue to show me your way and your will.*

## Devotional 7

*"Here am I; send me!"* —Isaiah 6:8

In these verses Isaiah plumbs the depths and the heights of spiritual experience. Nothing is more harrowing than standing before God in all our pettiness, selfishness, greed, and hatred. Isaiah wails, "Woe is me! . . . For I am a man of unclean lips." This experience doesn't destroy Isaiah, however. God cleanses him so that he is ready to say, "Here am I; send me."

This experience shaped Isaiah's work as a prophet. His job included speaking words of judgment to the people. He would understand how people felt; he'd known sin firsthand, too. Similarly, because he had experienced the cleansing power of God, he could speak words of hope with conviction.

Unfortunately, it doesn't always work this way in my life. Sometimes I catch myself harshly judging people. Isaiah's words remind us that forgiveness is a miraculous gift of God. Receiving grace is a mountaintop experience. Are we ready to be sent out to share that message?

—Carol Penner

*Thank you, Lord, for helping me to confront my need for your grace. Thank you for equipping me to share your good news of grace in Christ Jesus.*