

Standing in the Fire
Isaiah 6:1-8
Sunday, May 17, 2026

Over the past six years, it has become common to hear that we are in “unprecedented times.” I don't know about you, but I would like to live in some "precedented" times instead of all the unprecedented times we have had of late! So much has happened at such a dizzying pace that it's hard to keep up. It's difficult to find stable ground. It's very hard to know whom to trust. It's hard to know how to respond to a world that changes so much. It's hard to see that evil is not winning; it's hard to see where God is working. Our current senior class, which we are honoring this Sunday, began their teenage years at the start of the pandemic. The chaos of the last six years is all they have known as teens. Thus, we are especially proud of how they have thrived and overcome such times.

In our passage today, the prophet Isaiah finds himself in troubled times. The king Uzziah is either ill or has died. Uzziah reigned longer than any other Hebrew king and was one of the few good kings of Judah. Even though his son, Jotham, had been ruling as a co-regent for about ten years, there was undoubtedly anxiety about Jotham becoming king, since the vast majority of OT kings were evil men. Isaiah may also have been experiencing personal distress over Uzziah's death, since Jewish tradition holds that Isaiah was a relative of King Uzziah. In this case, the king's death was not just a national tragedy for Isaiah but also a deeply personal one.

In the midst of these unsettled times, Isaiah encounters God during worship in the temple. He sees God on the throne of the universe, with his glory filling the temple. God is attended by seraphs proclaiming his glory. These seraphs are not the cute baby angels we often think of. The word seraph means "burning ones." The word is more often associated with serpents (whose

venom creates a quite unpleasant burning sensation, so I hear), so Isaiah may have been seeing winged serpents who were on fire! No matter exactly what Isaiah saw, it was a dramatic, visceral experience of God's presence, one that did not leave him comforted but undone! Isaiah's response acknowledges how far he is from the God he has just experienced. He is reminded of all the things he has said he should not have said, and of the things he should have said but left unsaid. Isaiah realizes that he has experienced something that will require him to change. He cannot remain who he is and survive this encounter.

In the midst of Isaiah's unworthiness, God extends grace through a seraph who takes a burning coal from the altar, presses it to Isaiah's lips, and declares that this act has forgiven Isaiah's trespasses against God. God takes the initiative to extend mercy and forgiveness to Isaiah.

You may have noticed a detail left out of the story: Isaiah's reaction to the seraph's approach. I wonder what Isaiah felt as the angel approached him with a red-hot coal. We know he didn't run away. Was he frozen in place by fear? Did he stand still out of bravery? Or out of trust?

Isaiah stood, and after he was purified by the heat of the coal, he heard God ask the famous question, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah answered the call to be sent, and the rest is history. Isaiah had a great time being a prophet. He got to go out, preach the word, shake hands after the service, and go home for a nice Sunday nap.

Nope, that is not what happens! Isaiah is told that his mission will fail. He is told that the people will hear what God has to say but not understand it. He is told to continue this mission until the consequences of the Judeans' lack of understanding are made manifest in the total destruction of their land. I bet that did not go over well. Isaiah's task was not the job you would choose if

you wanted to make friends and be liked. Yet, as we know, Isaiah remained faithful to this mission, inspiring the words we have today in the book that bears his name.

Over and over again in Scripture, we see stories of people who encounter God, receive a call, and face hardship in carrying it out, from Abram to Moses to the prophets to Jesus to the apostles, including Paul. So why do Christians often act as if we should expect the opposite? We seem to think we are guaranteed success, wealth, power, and happiness if we follow God's call in our lives. I'm not trying to be a downer, but it seems that following the call is hazardous to our health and wealth.

Yet, like Isaiah, we are in God's powerful presence. When we worship, singing the songs of our faith, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we pray for ourselves, our neighbors, and our enemies, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we give our time, effort, and finances to help others, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence.

And... when we arrive at work to begin our day's labor, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we have lunch with our co-workers, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we walk the hallways of our schools, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we drive home on our noisy, crowded streets, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we arrive home and attend to the business of maintaining our home and family, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. When we walk our neighborhoods or hike a trail in the woods, we are in God's powerful, fiery presence. To paraphrase Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "the earth is filled with heaven/and every common tree is afire with God." Next week, we will celebrate Pentecost,

when the Holy Spirit descended like fire into our presence. Do we realize the enormity of this?
Do we recognize that something has to change in us in response?

We have also experienced God's forgiveness. We have sat at the feet of Christ, learning from him how to live an abundant life. We have seen the example of his love on the cross, as he endured the ultimate suffering to demonstrate it. We have experienced the continued grace of God, and we have experienced the love of Christ given to us when we least deserved it. This justifying grace, which God offers, forgives us when we fail and sets us free when we feel we least deserve it.

For us, the questions remain in these unprecedented times, "How do we respond when we are faced with the fire of God's presence and forgiveness? Do we shy away from it, or do we embrace it? Are we willing to say 'send me' when the call comes? Are we willing to obey, even to the destruction of everything we hold dear, believing the promise that all will be restored?"