

## 24<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

### Isaiah 6:1-13

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!' And he said, 'Go and say to this people:

"Keep listening, but do not comprehend;  
keep looking, but do not understand."

Make the mind of this people dull,  
and stop their ears,  
and shut their eyes,  
so that they may not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and comprehend with their minds,  
and turn and be healed.'

Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said:

'Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is utterly desolate;  
until the Lord sends everyone far away,  
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.

Even if a tenth part remains in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains standing  
when it is felled.'

The holy seed is its stump.

What is the role of destruction in creation?

The harvest is well underway. Fields once full of corn, soybeans, tobacco and wheat are now being turned under in preparation for planting next spring.

In a similar way, those of you with gardens have put them to bed for the winter.

Bushes, shrubs, and other perennials have been cutback too.

What is the role of destruction in creation?

Over the summer, I was blessed to visit the home of Lorin Fulton and her husband, Ted. Lorin worships with us. They live in Stub Lund's old family farmhouse. Ted, who is an excellent carpenter, has basically gutted the house down to its bones, saving the best of the beautiful old farmhouse, and remodeling it from the inside out.

What is the role of destruction in creation?

Back in the early 1990s, while I was living in Indianapolis, a tornado roared through the town of Greencastle destroying among many things, the Presbyterian Church in the downtown area. A fire broke out in the remnants, causing the boiler to explode. All that remained, were several pieces of wooden pulpit furniture, and those were charred. A member of the church took the pieces and miraculously, restored them. They were like seeds planted, and from them, a new church grew.

What is the role of destruction in creation?

I ask because the theme of destruction and creation is woven into the message Isaiah.

Had Isaiah had a heads up on the message he was to deliver on God's behalf, I wonder if he would have been so quick to say, "Here I am, Lord! Send me!"

But here he is in the year that King Uzziah died, finding himself in the awe-spring (or is it dread-filled) presence of the Holy One, high and lifted up. In this moment, he recognizes his own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the people, confessing both. Woe is me! I am a person of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. Together, we are guilty as charged, Lord.

In confessing, Isaiah receives absolution and mercy, when one of the winged seraphs flies towards him with a red-hot coal from the fire and touches his lips, saying: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

Personally, I think this would make for some very dramatic worship if we reacted this each Sunday as a part of the Assurance of Forgiveness! Now, where did we put that Seraph costume?

Which brings us back to this very famous exchange between God and Isaiah, a call and response which was turned into the beloved hymn "Here I Am, Lord".

What is the role of destruction in creation? You know, we very seldom every get beyond Isaiah's response, "Here I am, Lord. Send me."

And for good reason. God sends Isaiah out with a message not of tidings of great joy with peace on earth for all people. No, it is a message of destruction.

Say to the people, God tells Isaiah, this message:  
"Keep listening, but do not comprehend;  
keep looking, but do not understand."  
Make the mind of this people dull,

and stop their ears,  
and shut their eyes,  
so that they may not look with their eyes,  
and listen with their ears,  
and comprehend with their minds,  
and turn and be healed.'

Isaiah, begins to wonder why he ever opened his mouth and volunteered, saying, 'How long, O Lord?'

How long? God tells Isaiah:  
'Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is utterly desolate;  
until the Lord sends everyone far away,  
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.  
Even if a tenth part remains in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains standing  
when it is felled.'

Destruction! Total destruction! Let that soak in.

In the year that King Uzziah died, he had a grandson, Ahaz, and a great-grandson, Hezekiah, who were the kings of the northern and southern kingdoms of Judah and Israel. Uzziah's death created great political instability and turmoil among the people. Things were not going smoothly. I know, surprising isn't it.

It was into this political mess that Isaiah piped up and said, "Hey God, send me!"

Who of us wants to take that type of message out into our world today?

I wonder if Isaiah might have added Barry McGuire's 1965 song, "Eve of Destruction" to his prophetic playlist?

"The eastern world, it is explodin',  
Violence flarin', bullets loadin',  
You're old enough to kill but not for votin',  
You don't believe in war, but what's that gun you're totin',  
And even the Jordan river has bodies floatin',  
But you tell me over and over and over again my friend,  
Ah, you don't believe we're on the eve of destruction."

What is the role of destruction in creation?

It seems, like the people who originally heard God's message from Isaiah, we are still teetering on the "eve of destruction". It seems our hearing and eyesight and mental comprehension haven't improved much.

Each year "We the People" shoot and kill 30,000 of our own people. Families, friends, and faith communities are being torn apart by political turmoil. Economic disparity grows. So does food scarcity. We debate whether health care is a right or privilege and whether a loved one with a pre-existing condition might bankrupt the family. Systemic racism is still our nation's original sin. White supremacists, hate groups and militia groups have become mainstream. It seems we are doing a good job of laying waste to our land and people, and we have stopped listening and seeing each other, and in doing so, we are not listening to or seeing God in each other.

What is the role of destruction in creation?

Farmers have plowed under the remnants of their crops. Gardeners have pulled up the last of their vegetable stocks, and cut the perennials to the ground. Arborists have pruned the bushes and trees that needed trimming.

Each in their own way, laying waste to once was bountiful and full of beauty and life. Destruction! Yes, but only in preparation for the new creation to come.

God's last words to the people are not about destruction and death, but rather, life.

Listen to the final words of God: "The holy seed is its stump."

We know this stump, don't we? Each Advent, we hear Isaiah speak of it, when he reminds the people that, "a seed shall grow forth from the stump of Jesse."

What is the role of destruction in creation? The seasons of the year know the answer. For those of you who farm or garden, you know the answer too.

So do we, as the people of God. We tell about it beginning in Advent when everything seems so dark, and hopeless, we cling to a holy seed called hope which grows from the stump. Amen.