

Touched By An Angel...With A Branding Iron Final Draft

^{NRS} **Isaiah 6:1** 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.² 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.³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory."⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.⁵ 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!"⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs.⁷ 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."⁸ 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!"

This morning we hear Isaiah's call story- the moment when Isaiah experienced God's presence and had a vision for what to do with his life. And it's one of the strangest call narratives in scripture.

Now what makes it odd isn't the angel with the coal. Every call story in scripture is a little weird like that. Moses ran into that bush out in the desert. Ezekiel saw wheels within wheels and then ate a scroll that was as sweet as honey. John of Revelation fame saw a lamb with 7 horns and 7 eyes and, not to be outdone by Ezekiel, also ate a scroll- only he should have checked the expiration date, because even though it started out sweet it ended up bitter in his stomach afterwards, making him sick.

So pretty much all call stories are a little strange- what makes Isaiah stick out isn't so much *what* happens- but *when* it happens. Every other call story in scripture happens at the beginning of a person's ministry- it's the reason they go into ministry. Basically, you've got a person going along, no big deal, then you have this moment and they experience God's presence- and then, wham!, they're off.

But not Isaiah. Isaiah was already doing ministry- he already was a prophet. And Isaiah had been pretty lucky as prophets go. He spoke his word during the time of King Uzziah- one of the good kings. And he did pretty much what was expected of him. He criticized the nations around Israel- warning them to back off. And he spoke a few words against Israel, too- mainly about the importance of justice and playing fair. But up until Uzziah's death Isaiah's work was pretty much business as usual. Nothing really stood out about him to be sure.

And I imagine him there in the temple that morning. Just sitting there going about morning prayer as usual. Thinking about Uzziah's loss. Feeling like his best days were probably behind him. Wondering if the market was going to improve anytime soon, wondering if his 401k was ever going to come back. I imagine him sitting there feeling like his work was pretty much done. Pretty soon there would be a new king, one who probably wouldn't be that much better or worse than this one. And he's sitting there wondering if anything he's done or said has really made that much of a difference.

But then, right in the middle of worship, just as Isaiah's starting to think about his things to do list for that day, God shows up. (Isn't it nice to know that at least from time to time God does show up in church?) Yeah, Isaiah is just sitting there and worship is going on as usual, and the priests have lit the censers, and the incense is rising, and Isaiah is kind of drifting off, when all of a sudden he has this absolutely palpable sense that not only is there a God, a real God, but that that God is there. And he's so overcome he actually has the experiencing of seeing God's presence- something like a robe filling the sanctuary, and all of these angle like things flying around.

And the first thing he experiences is how lost he feels. He feels himself to be a man of unclean lips- he feels how far apart he is from who he's been made to be. And he realizes all the people around him are like this, too. And the amazing thing, the amazing thing is that God doesn't come down and with eyes blazing really let him have it- God doesn't come down and wag his finger and say, "Bad dog!" Isaiah is already feeling this. No, God sends an angel, a seraphim with a burning coal to touch his lips, and burn away this sense of regret over what might have been.

What a gift this is! Isaiah's wasted so much time, he's gone down so many wrong paths- and God doesn't crush him, but cleanses him. Isaiah is given this gift- this chance in the middle of his life. He's been given this chance to start over- to start fresh.

Now, all this takes place in the temple, in worship, and I'm so glad it does. There are a lot of reasons we come to worship. For some of us it's social- we come to see people we care about, to check up on them. Others come because of someone else- either their spouse or their kids. They're all right with what's going on, but they're really here for someone else. This is absolutely fine. But sometimes we come because we really, really need to hear some good news- we need to come and experience God's love, God's blessing for us. We come because, like Isaiah, we've become a little bit lost, and we're not totally sure where to go next, and we need to know that today really is a new day and that we can start over- and that it's going to be ok. And when we experience this it's also like a gift- it's also like this incredible, precious gift.

But like all gifts- it won't do us much good if we don't pick it up, open it up, and decide what we want to do with it. Did you notice what God says after Isaiah is given the

gift of this moment? It's awful. It's the worst thing. It's a question. God offers this gift and ends saying, "Whom shall I send? And who shall go for us?"

Another way of putting this is God offers Isaiah this gift of a chance to start fresh- and then says, "OK, great. Now what are you going to do with it?"

In worship at it's best- we receive both this incredible gift of a second chance, a chance to start over; AND this terrible challenge- this annoying question of what are we going to do with this gift.

There are a lot of ways to responding to this gift, aren't there?

One thing we can do with this gift, one thing we can do is simply to reject it. We can simply not open it, or worse, give it back.

Fred Craddock is one of the most famous preachers and teachers of preaching in the world. I had the chance to hear him recently. I heard him talk about his hardest moment in ministry. The hardest moments in his life came when one of his students, this incredible, bright student, rejected not just the gift he had for preaching, but the gift of God's presence in his life.

Fred said of all the students he taught, this kid was the top three- he just was everything you would hope for in a preacher. In his first sermon he just blew him and the whole class away. He said they were all just bumping into the furniture as they left they were so mesmerized. Well, then he graduated- and he went back to his home state and he received the call from a little church there. And he wrote to Fred telling him of this enormous responsibility he felt- this crushing sense of responsibility. Fred responded

saying the things an old pastor would- telling him to hang in there and not expect too much of himself and to trust that it was really up to God anyway. Well, the young man's first Sunday came- and he didn't show up. They found him out by a lake that was close by, skipping rocks into it. He said he just couldn't do it. He just couldn't go in there and preach God's word to these people.

Well, they were a forgiving congregation. Some of the elders took him for a walk and told him they understood, that they knew he was nervous, and he had a week to get over it.

The young man did manage to get over it. He preached his first sermon there. And he wrote to Fred about it. He wrote, "Dear prof, today I dropped a stone in the water. Whether there be ripples or whether they reach the shore remains to be seen." A few days later Fred received a call from the young man's wife. He learned that young man, that gifted preacher- had taken his own life. She told him, "With the help of a silver handled revolver he returned the gift to God. No thanks."¹

Well most of us don't respond to dramatically. Most of us don't just reject the gifts God gives us- most of us are a little more nuanced, a little more sneaky. No we accept the gift, but most of us, most of us just don't trust it- just don't believe it's for us, that it's for someone else- someone better prepared or with a better past. I've known people who show up almost every Sunday hungry to hear a good word- but equally sure that if anyone *really* knew who they were, *really* knew where they've been, or what they believe- that they really wouldn't be welcome. And not just from the congregation- but from God.

¹ From Fred Craddock's sermon "The Gift", preached at the Festival of Homiletics, Atlanta, GA, 2009.

Moses was like this. Moses grew up as a bi-racial orphan, feeling kind of half Egyptian and half-Jewish. And then on that hot day when he saw that guard beating that Hebrew slave- something inside Moses broke away and he just lost it, and he killed the man. He killed a man- with his bare hands. Unable to live with himself, unable to stay in this place, he ran, he exiled himself. And he wound up out in the wilderness, working on a farm, lying about who he was, and spending his days as a shepherd- barely one rung among common thieves.

And then when God comes to him out there, when God comes to him in that burning bush- a bush with a fire hot enough to burn every blemish away. Moses just can't quite bring himself to believe it. God speaks to him, God calls to him, God tells him he needs him- that it's time to stop wallowing in guilt and get up and lead his people. And Moses just can't believe God would want him.

At one point Moses even tells God this- saying he can't be a leader, that he likes to keep his head down, that he's a bad public speaker. And this is the only time God is really angry at Moses- and it's not because he killed a man, it's not because he ran, but when he was given a chance to start over, he just wanted to come up with excuses.

Sometimes we come and we even experience God's presence here, calling to us, but we think, "That can't be for me." God needs people smarter, or younger, or older, or better looking, or richer, or whatever. God can't really be speaking to me. Well how dare us, how *dare* us, decide what God is able to do through us.

Of course, there are others of responding to this gift, this gift of God coming to us and offering us a fresh start. Another way of responding to the gift is to test it, to push it.

We think, “Oh yeah, God? You think you can work through *me*? Well deal with *this!*”
And we find every way we can to undermine and sabotage the gifts, the love we’ve been given.

Some of you might have heard of Samson from the book of Judges. Samson’s mom had a hard time conceiving, and when she finally did, she thought it was a miracle. And so before the baby was born, she promised to dedicate this baby to God. She said she would make him a Nazirite, a holy man, and she wouldn’t let a razor touch his head or let him touch strong drink. His entire life would be a model of holiness.

Well, it probably would have been a good thing had she asked the boy what he wanted, but our parents don’t always do this do they? And so this poor boy grew up in the strictest possible way. He went to school looking strange with his hair all going crazy. And he allowed to even THINK of doing anything out of line. When some of the other boys somehow got their hands on a six pack from an older brother, Samson knew he had to say, ‘No.’

I mean can you imagine the pressure? And finally, Samson, this religious little good two-shoes, he finally snapped. He finally came to the point where he had had enough, and if God was going to work through him, then he was going to make God work hard...really hard. Samson didn’t waste his time on your penny ante average teenage rebellion, either. He didn’t grow a terrible mustache or get an earring. He didn’t hit the bars. He skipped over all of that and got himself involved with a Philistine woman- and not just some girl either- a Philistine prostitute.

A Philistine prostitute. I mean if Samson thought about it for a hundred years I don’t think he could have found a less kosher thing to do.

And sure enough things didn't go well. Delilah wound up finding a way to cut his hair, and God did take away Samson's strength. And the Philistines wound up tying Samson up in the entrance of one of their temples.

But the amazing thing. The amazing thing is that this boy, even after making some truly bad decisions, truly reckless decisions- in that moment when he was tied up. His memories from boyhood came back to him, his memories from a lifetime ago came back to him- and he prayed. He prayed. He asked God to help. And God, our absurd God, listened. God listened and one last time filled Samson with strength, and the boy took that place down.

Some of you have spent some time testing God, pushing God away to see how much you can get away with, to see how much God will put up with. Some of you have friends and family, kids, you've watched do this. Sometimes the people you love the most- they just have to test it, push it. They just have to find out things the hard way. And sometimes they learn quickly. And sometimes they never do. And sometimes we can walk with them through this, and sometimes it's just too painful.

I don't know why God listened to Samuel- after Samuel pretty much made a career out of pushing God away. I just know God did, although it cost Samson everything.

There really is a God. So many of you have shared with me the moment or the time when you experienced this God, experienced the gift of this love- even if it was only for an instant. And not only that but you've been given gifts no one else has been given. No one. You've been given friends, family, strangers that only you can care for.

Of course there is a question that remains. What are you going to do about it?

Amen.