

Singed

Scripture text: Isaiah 6:1-8
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey
Center Church on the Green, November 15, 2020



When I was growing up I don't recall that my mother's kitchen was especially loaded with gadgets. There was a Mixmaster stand mixer, an electric can opener and an electric carving knife, and the usual assortment of implements like a potato masher and a bread knife.

And a Bernzomatic propane torch.

My mom owned a propane torch. It was the same model UL2317 Brass Pencil Flame Propane Torch head that you can purchase today for about 15 bucks, the one that you use around the house for soldering, thawing, and melting different things.

Some of you may have already guessed why my mom used one in the kitchen. When I was a kid, you didn't get chicken in vacuum-sealed plastic pouches, all cut up and ready to cook. Unless the butcher had done the cutting up for you, chicken came from the supermarket looking like—well, a chicken. The basic things had been done, but you bought a roaster, or a fryer, and you had to cut it up yourself.

Before you did that, there was the matter of the pin feathers. Chickens in the supermarket had had their feathers removed, mostly. But some fragments remained. My mom would fire up her Bernzomatic UL2316 propane torch, and singe the chicken all over to burn up the remaining pin feathers before she cut it up, or roasted it whole.

And believe me, that torch could SINGE! You didn't want to get anywhere near that bright blue flame, because it was no joke. You didn't want to feel that flame within a few inches of your hand.

>>>

I can still picture that flame and its effects today. And in times like these you might be feeling a kind of flame ... under your seat. As I record this meditation there is such a bubble of discontent and turmoil in this nation. I'm speaking to you future people, over a week ahead of where I am today, and praying that there has been amazing clarity and unity and that all the problems we're experiencing back here in the first week of November have been resolved.

But, I'm guessing not so much. Maybe for the moment we're over the shock that is a natural part of seeing and hearing everything we have experienced this year. It is part of our nature to feel that shock when things happen that are so extraordinary, or so

unexpected. Before COVID-19 came on the scene, we thought that pandemics were part of our distant past, or that they no longer happened here. Before this year's political discourse turned so ugly, we thought that our shared ideals would provide natural constraints on political speech and political action.

It reminds me of that time nearly 20 years ago when passenger airliners were weaponized and flown into buildings within our borders. For nearly 200 years, the closest an enemy had ever gotten to an attack on our soil was Hawaii. The possibility had receded into the distant past. Once we were over the shock our national impulse was to retaliate against...something. It was Doomsday, and something had to be done. That's the defensive impulse writ large.

It may be our reaction to the hazard and uncertainty we are encountering today. That may be our reaction even though there are no ramparts to defend, or attacks to avenge. The place in which we are grounded is that murky, dirty, angry spot where something must be done, even if we don't know why and we can't make sense of it.

We feel that flame under our seat, propelling us out of our chairs and driving us into a place where we feel like yelling and waving our arms to relieve the pain and chaos.

>>>

So, what do we do with today's narrative which involves a flame applied to the other end of the digestive tract from our seats?

There's certainly enough to stop us in our tracks. Did you really take in that description of the angels that Isaiah offers us? He calls them "seraphs" —literally "the burning ones." These beings have six wings, and they only need two for flying—which they're doing. They're taking turns calling out

HOLY HOLY HOLY IS GOD-OF-THE-ANGEL-ARMIES
HIS BRIGHT GLORY FILLS THE WHOLE EARTH.

No boast, just fact, they're reminding each other in voices so loud that they shake the foundations of the Temple itself and voices so hot that the room is filled with smoke.

They are not this cute little porcelain angels that you put on your windowsill, or on a corner of your desk, to give you a little lift during the day. These seraphs will scorch you, but good, if you get too close.

It's no wonder Isaiah's heart sinks. He's been taking in the news of the Assyrians making their plans to invade. He's been fantasizing about catching an Assyrian soldier or two on a spear. Or perhaps he's been thinking about running to safety. His heart is

not in the right place to be in God's presence, especially with these burning beings creating such a terrible presence.

Just when Isaiah is sure that his thorough corruption has doomed him, there's one more thing: one of the seraphs swoops in and comes face to face with him. And the seraph is carrying a coal from the sacrificial fire that is so hot that even the burning-being seraph needs tongs to handle it.

Don't doubt that in this vision it's a genuine ordeal when the seraph touches the coal to Isaiah's mouth. The coal is hotter than the bright blue flames of the Bernzomatic, and anything that shouldn't have been on Isaiah's mouth is singed away instantly.

In that moment, Isaiah sees that God is not in the realm of revenge, or fantasizing about skewering Assyrians, or just drifting along to see how the Creation will play out. God is grounded in a realm that has nothing to do with squabbling empires. God is grounded in a place of pure delight and hope for the Creation, and God needs a messenger.

And so Isaiah responds, "I'll go...send me!"

>>>

In that vision—and remember it is a vision—the flames yield a gift of holiness. Isaiah's response comes from a place where God's

holiness has a home. His impulses and doubts about his worthiness melt away in pure love.

We can find that place. We can accept the purifying word of God in our hearts. We can allow holiness to melt away our anxieties and unworthiness. We can allow that holiness to emerge in word and deed.

When God calls “Whom shall I send...next door? down the street? into the world?” we can respond from that holy place. We can go knowing that we carry a gift that disarms the confusion and the anger and the impulse to skewer the Assyrians of our day. We can...we must...respond with the affirmation “I’ll go. Send me!”

>>>

Still speaking to you from the distant past of last week, I can’t help but reflect that something is fundamentally broken in our society. The way we speak, the way we take things in, the way we affiliate, the way we believe...it’s like we’ve broken into big chunks that process all those things in unrecognizable and incomprehensible ways.

But we have something. We have a gift. And it’s a gift much better than little porcelain angels. It’s so powerful that it takes six-winged seraphim to deliver it. And it can heal all the cracks that are driving us apart.

God is calling us to bring that gift into the world.

May the holy place God has sined into us respond to that summoning call. When we see or hear a need for healing, may we respond to God's call and say, I'll go. Send me!