

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Jul 9th 2016

The first reading makes a huge cosmic stretch in eight verses—from King Uzziah to King God Almighty. It starts by dating the time of Isaiah's call to the year of the death of Uzziah, a good king of a small place during times of great change. Uzziah was king of Judah during the final quarter of the 8th century BC, the days of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah, who proceeds to tell his transforming experience of God in the temple. The prophet tells of his vision of God with his "garment" filling the temple, and of the two six-winged seraphim, who sing the triple Holy that we still echo at Eucharist today, and proclaim that all the earth is filled with his glory.

This is a bigger testimony to faith than you might think at first. In those days, the people of the Middle East thought of each region and each people as having their own god. So for the people of Israel to claim that their God—YHWH—was the god, indeed the Creator, of everything and everybody—that was a new way of thinking about reality and reality's Source. The God who freed little Israel from slavery in Egypt was also the maker of everything that is. Isaiah, and the two other prophets who wrote in his name during the next two centuries—making that long sixty-six-chapter scroll—became the primary 'evangelists' of that amazing news.

Isaiah was utterly overwhelmed by this experience in the temple: "I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen THE KING, THE LORD OF HOSTS ("hosts" = the "cosmic armies," a way a referring to what we call the planets and stars). What a leap—from dead king Uzziah of Judah to the ever-living KING of everything! Yet, after a seraph comes with a burning coal to cleanse Isaiah's unclean lips, that awesome presence proceeds to call him to be his messenger!

What a surprise that the vocation story of Isaiah helps us read the passage from the Gospel of Matthew! Those words of Jesus, sending the disciples on mission and promising to protect and empower them to pass on his message (which, after all, is about the kingship of God and about becoming his kingdom on earth, commissioning us to do the same, including turning what Pope Francis calls our common home into what Jesus calls the Father's "household." Jesus' words echo the call of Isaiah. And like Isaiah's commission, Jesus' mandate goes on to prophesy resistance and rejection, but the Gospel's master narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of King Jesus assures us of the triumph of the creator's plan for peace and unity. We are commissioned and empowered to continue that prophetic mission. There is no better time to acknowledge that commission than now, when the human family knows it is—down deep—one, even though violence and division has never seemed more threatening. The Lord is with us.