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Upon Recognizing the Holy
Isaiah 6:1-8

Greg Jones is a Methodist minister, a regular contributor to the “Christian Century” magazine, and dean of Duke Divinity School. He tells about being invited to lead a weekend conference at an upper-class Virginia Episcopal Church several years ago, which included preaching on that Sunday. He had somewhat forgotten about the commitment until his administrative assistant reminded him six weeks beforehand. Along with her reminder, she handed him the lectionary readings for the Sunday he would be preaching. Over the next couple of days, he wrote the sermon and set it aside.

Shortly afterwards, Greg received a phone from a woman at the Episcopal Church. In her gracious and dignified manner the woman explained, “We have a problem. We don’t know your title.” What she was saying was that for publicity purposes, they needed to know what to refer him—Dr. Jones, The Rev. Dr. Jones, Dean Jones, Professor Jones. The lady said, “Dr. Jones, we need to know your title.”

With that, Greg quickly moved through the papers on his desk in search of the sermon he had written, thinking the woman on the other end of the phone was asking for his sermon title. Now, the gospel portion of the lectionary reading for the Sunday his administrative assistant had given him was about the woman who had anointed Jesus with the expensive oil. Greg said, “My title is ‘His Extravagant Holiness’.”

With reserve, the woman hesitated, then said, “Say what?” Greg repeated, “His Extravagant Holiness.” Six weeks later as Greg pulled up to the church, the sign out front out front read, “His Extravagant Holiness L. Gregory Jones.¹ As much as I enjoy his articles, my sermon title this morning, “Upon Recognizing the Holy,” has nothing to do with Dean Jones at Duke Divinity School.

¹ As told by Diana Butler Bass in her second lecture, “A Realistic Sense of History,” at the “2009 January Adventure” conference at Epworth by the Sea,” St. Simons Island, Georgia.

“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....” For the first five chapters, Isaiah has God blasting the people of Judah for their spiritual insincerity and their moral shallowness.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (Isaiah 6:10)

For five chapters, he condemns them for their hollow offerings and sacrifices, for their rituals and high holy days.

My soul hates your appointed feasts...Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean...learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow...” 1:14-17)

These “woe to you”s continue until the beginning of the sixth chapter.

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....

In order to understand and appreciate this text, we need to understand what happened to King Uzziah. Uzziah took the throne of Judah when he was only sixteen years of age. He reigned as King of Judah for fifty-two years, making quite a name for himself and doing many wonderful things for Judah. His pride and arrogance, however, led to his downfall. The 26th chapter of 2 Chronicles tells the story. After becoming powerful and over-confident, arrogance followed. On one day, growing impatient with the High Priest’s pace of offering incense at the alter, Uzziah took the ritual into his own hands. As Azariah, the High Priest, and eighty other priest stood trying to dissuade him, the ground shook and bright rays of sun shone through, falling on the kings face, seizing the king with leprosy. King Uzziah was immediately taken from the temple and lived out the remaining eleven years of his life separated by the leprosy from family and society (751—742 B.C.E.)

Isaiah begins the sixth chapter with,

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....

Three universal things happen to everyone who experiences a deeper level of the abundant life. I am usually not keen on using alliteration or rhyme to enumerate points, but sometimes they are useful if they hold true to their

meaning. My three words for you to remember this morning are: perception; confession; and reception.

Perception. Isaiah saw things as they were.

Decay in Judah was in the form of society, government, and religion. “In the year that Uzziah died...”

When the whole world can name torture for what it is—your enemies, your allies, the Red Cross, medical experts, even those who have willingly tried out “water-boarding,” and you still don’t get it, you are in deep denial with little hope of personal growth or change.

In the eighth chapter of Mark, a theme of perception runs its course. In the preceding chapters, Jesus had used a few loaves of bread and small fish to feed a crowd of five thousand. In the eighth chapter, a similar experience occurred, this time with a crowd of four thousand. After three days of this, Jesus told the disciples to feed the crowd and send them home. “With what?” they said. “We’re in the middle of the desert. There is no bread out here.” So, Jesus went through the process of collecting what food was among the crowd. He blessed it, then gave it to the disciples to give to the people. Seven baskets full were left over this time. Five verses later, Jesus and the disciples are crossing the Sea of Galilee with only one loaf of bread. Jesus makes a comment about yeast—“be weary of the yeast of the Pharisee’s”—and they think he is saying something about not having enough food. At that point, Jesus said, “You don’t get it, do you? Don’t you have eyes? Don’t you have ears? Can’t you remember the things that have just happened? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened?” (Mark 8:17-21) They didn’t understand at all the abundance of God’s resources.

Immediately following this pointed conversation, they came ashore at Bethsaida. Jesus healed a blind man by putting spittle on his eyes and praying for him. “What do you see?” Jesus asked the man. “I see people, but they look like trees walking.” Jesus touched his eyes again and that time he saw everything as it was.

Perception. “In the year that Uzziah died,” Isaiah saw things as they really were. Dropping his defensiveness, putting together the things he had seen, and heard, and opening his heart to invisible possibilities of the world, he perceived the deeper truths around him.

Isaiah's new perception led to **confession**. His "Woe is you," turned to "Woe is me. I am guilty of the same kinds of things I have been accusing others of—deception, selfishness, insensitivity, and a lack of passion for God...but my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts!"

When we see things as they really are and realize we are as guilty as those we have criticized, we are drawn to humility. We begin asking questions. We are interested in learning so that we don't go through the rest of life making the same mistakes over and over.

You remember the story of Job? An upright man in his community, he loses everything he has—his children, his wealth, and finally his health. That part of the story takes place in the first two chapters. For the next thirty-five chapters, Job rails against God, proclaiming his innocence and goodness, demanding an explanation from God. The following four chapters is God's response to Job with questions that no one can answer. The closing chapter forty-two reveals the insight Job has gained. Job's confesses his arrogance. "My knowledge of you, Lord, was a second-hand one. Now my own eyes have seen you. I despise the way I have lived and spoken and I repent."

Until a person develops the humility to acknowledge being wrong or lacking wisdom, his life will never change and he will never experience the overwhelming presence of God...and all that comes with it.

The last word I leave you with is **Reception**. Perception, confession, and reception.

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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." 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 the only time that seraphims are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible. They are later mentioned in the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Literally, the word means "burning one." The vision, this mental experience that Isaiah had was of the highest order of angel coming to him at this point of perception and confession. The seraphim transferred this burning, this heat, this all-consuming passion, to Isaiah. Thomas Aquinas, speaking about seraphims, said that this metaphorical image of the light and heat of God rouses people "to a like

fervor...cleansing them wholly by the heat." Aquinas also said that the image of a seraphim speaks of the fire of God that brings clarity, perfectly enlightening others."²

Reception—fully incorporating what we have experienced—leads one to the same conclusion that Isaiah came to. God, through the vision of the six-winged angels setting his heart of fire to follow nothing but the consuming power of love, truth, and justice, called out to Isaiah: "Whom shall I send, and who will go—who is willing to be a change-agent in this world, who is willing to help give birth in this world to a new way of living?" Isaiah responded: "Here am I; I am willing."

To all of you who have or will soon be graduated from your high schools or colleges, the opportunity of embracing the "road less traveled" is more easily seen. You are at a definitive point in your life—finishing one important part of the journey and beginning the next important journey.

And to the rest of you, I would remind you that those "Isaiah" experiences are never limited to the young. Look at those being tapped in our time to solve some of the complicated problems of the world—experienced generals to champion new roads of peace, seasoned diplomats reengaging friends and foes, engineers probing new alternatives to solve energy and economic problems, as well as many very young adults taking high-level responsibilities in things like brokering a new life for our nation's auto industry. At a time when virtually all church denominations are in a long decline in membership and relatively few struggling to bring the Church into the twenty-first century, God still calls persons to respond to the practice of teaching, serving, ministry, and preaching in the hopes of enlightening people to the Kingdom of God and the Way of Jesus.

While Tyler Caccavale, one of our college students, is spending six weeks this summer helping to build homes for poor Hondurans, Chuck Webb, a medical doctor for twenty-five plus years, will begin his first seminary course next month—Hebrew. At a time when Chuck could coast on into retirement, enjoy following a familiar routine of work and study, he has chosen a new

² From St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, as referenced in "Seraph," Wikipedia, on June 6, 2009.

challenge. And, when the fire of God consumes you and you see things as they are, you can do no other.

Mechtild of Mageburg once said: “The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw—and knew I saw—all things in God and God in all things.”

So, before you rush to the last of today’s verses from Isaiah and conclude that you aren’t the one being called, I urge you to begin with the year that King Uzziah died—the world and your life as it is today—and open your eyes, your ears, and your thinking to all that is around you. Then, be still long enough to see things as they really are. The burning coals of passion to be a part of solutions in this wonderful world in which we live aren’t always obvious. If you experience them, follow your heart.

Prayer of Discipleship

Isaiah 6:1-8

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. 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. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. 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!"

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. 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." 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!"

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."