

WHEN THE BURRITO HAS DRIPPED ON YOUR SHIRT

A Message for the New Year: Topic – Security
Isaiah 6:1-7

INTRODUCTION

Christmas this year was a very joyful celebration in our family this year. In part for me that was because of the contrast with what was happening last year at Christmas. At the end of last year Michael and Carissa had just been through a scary experience. They had been trying for years to start a family, to no avail. They were dealing with the heartache of infertility. As a seemingly last resort they were going through the in vitro fertilization process. In middle of December they went through the process of harvesting Carissa's eggs. Late that afternoon Michael called us. He was calm, but clearly shaken. He told us Carissa was in an ambulance being taken to the hospital. We rushed to meet them at the hospital. He told us Carissa had been in terrible pain and then began to have difficulty breathing. They had called the doctor who told them to immediately call 911. It turned out that Carissa was bleeding internally as a result of the procedure and that night had to have emergency surgery to fix the problem. After all of that they learned a week or so later that the IVF process had failed. Carissa would not get pregnant.

They were terribly disappointed and saddened, and Laurie and I were heartbroken for them. We knew how deeply they longed to have children, and now it looked like it was not going to happen. They had tried everything, and nothing had worked. There was nowhere else for them to go. And that's why this Christmas had such an impact on me. We got to spend both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with Michael, Carissa, and their 3 month old baby, Wesley. When there was nothing left for Michael and Carissa to do but keep praying and trusting God, about 3 weeks after her traumatic episode with IVF, against all odds she became pregnant! What a difference a year makes! Last year at this time we were experiencing great sadness over what seemed to be the loss of a dream, this year we were rejoicing over the fulfillment of that seemingly lost dream. The contrast between Christmas 2018 and Christmas 2019 was joyful, but truly stark.

We are about to enter a new year. Can you believe in a few days it will be 2020? Is it really possible that it has been 20 years since the beginning of the 21st century? One fifth of this century is now behind us. There really is only one thing certain about this upcoming year, and that is that it will bring change. Sometimes change is joyful and wonderful, as it was in our family with the arrival of baby Wesley. But sometimes change can be painful or disorienting. Whether joyful or sorrowful, it often cannot be anticipated. No one could have foreseen this time last year that before 2019 ended, Boeing Aircraft, one of America's juggernaut companies, would be reeling, its reputation badly stained and its financial condition seriously damaged by

two crashes of its latest model of airplane and the subsequent grounding of that model. What is going to happen in 2020?

We just don't know what is going to happen in the world or in our lives. And that creates uncertainty. And uncertainty can be difficult. A Dutch psychological study divided subjects into two groups. The first group was told they would be monitored as they were subjected to 20 strong electric shocks. The second group was told they would be monitored as they were subjected to 17 mild shocks and 3 strong shocks. The results revealed that the second group sweated more than the first and had significantly faster heart beats than the first. The researchers determined that the uncertainty of not knowing whether a shock would be mild or strong caused more discomfort and fear for the subjects. Harvard psychologist Daniel Gilbert says, "An uncertain future leaves us stranded in an unhappy present with nothing to do but wait." He goes on to say that a sense of gloom is "a matter of insufficient certainty" about the future. Uncertainty can be exciting, for we don't know what possibilities might lie ahead. But it can also be very difficult.

Change, unpredictability and uncertainty are a given as we enter the year 2020. Since that kind of uncertainty can lead to considerable unhappiness, fear and gloom, how can we navigate the uncertain waters of this coming new year? For some wisdom on that question let's look at Isaiah 6:1-7.

WE NEED TO SEE THE LORD'S HOLINESS

This passage records something that the prophet, Isaiah, saw. He was given a glimpse of the glory of God, perhaps in a vision. Verse 1 tells us this happened "in the year that King Uzziah died." Uzziah was one of Judah's best kings. According to the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* Uzziah, also known as Azariah, was "one of the most energetic and successful kings of Judah." But this happened in the year he died. Isaiah likely had this visionary experience either after Uzziah died or not long before when it was apparent he was about to die.

This was a time of considerable uncertainty. Uzziah had tried to seek the Lord and have his people follow. He had built a strong, stable government that was well run. He had done a good job with national security, keeping threatening enemies at bay. But what was going to happen with Uzziah gone? There was a powerful enemy off on the horizon. There was always the threat of spiritual wandering with the people of Israel. With Uzziah leaving the scene what would happen? Would Judah fall apart? Would they abandon their God as they were prone to do? Would they succumb to attacks from stronger enemies?

If you look at Isaiah 5 you can see why the prophet might have been seriously concerned. He depicts Judah as the Lord's vineyard. At the end of verse 2 he said the Lord, "looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit." In verses 5-6 the Lord says to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, "Now I will tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I will take away its hedge and it will be destroyed; I will break down its wall, and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland." That chapter ends with verse 30, which says, "If one looks at the land, there is only darkness and distress; even the sun will be darkened by clouds."

Well there's a cheery picture. Happy New Year! But in chapter 6 Isaiah is given a vision of the Lord on his throne, and for him, everything changed. His whole view of life, all of his priorities, his sense of security and his sense of what matters was totally changed. I think of a scene in an old movie when I read this passage. I confess, it's a movie I loved when it came out a long time ago. It's the movie, *Independence Day*, which was about a powerful and merciless alien race invading earth. In one scene the fighter pilot character played by Will Smith, wakes up one morning and deals with the mundane details of life. There had been what seemed a minor earthquake that morning. As he steps outside to pick up a newspaper (it's an old movie, made when people still got the newspaper), he is disgusted to see neighbors frantically packing up their cars to leave. He is amused that they would be so panicked by such a minor earthquake. Then he looks up and sees the real cause of the panic. Hovering menacingly over the city of Los Angeles is a massive alien spaceship. That one look changed everything. Suddenly he saw the world completely differently, and his priorities were totally revolutionized. Nothing would ever be the same.

For Isaiah, that's what happened. He, too, was totally revolutionized. He saw life in a completely different way after what he saw in this chapter. Nothing would ever be the same. What can help us deal with the uncertainty of our lives is having the same experience of seeing the Lord in a way that changes everything. In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan wrote, "We often fail to grasp our greatest need in times of greatest need. When we are distressed, bewildered, threatened, shaken, in those moments when we want more than anything God to do something...in those moments of greatest need our greatest need is simply to see the Lord...Nothing else can so quickly put our life into the right perspective."

What Isaiah saw was the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne. The expression, "the train of his robe filled the temple" puzzles me some. But I believe it is a figure of speech, a poetic way of saying just the fringe of God's glory was so brilliant that it filled the whole place. Isaiah says there were seraphim, some kind of heavenly being with 6 wings. They were flying, calling out to each other, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory."

Why did they repeat the word “holy”? Genesis 14 tells us about a battle between the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and some allies on one hand, and some invading armies on the other. Verse 10 tells us the Sodom and Gomorrah side got routed and many of their soldiers fell into tar pits in the area. The Hebrew of the verse is interesting. It literally says there were “pit pits” that they fell into. The repetition was used in Hebrew for emphasis. Those guys didn’t just fall into pits. They fell into pit pits, which are really gnarly pits. We’re talking sinkholes here, the kind of pits that swallow houses. If the writer had described them as “pit pit pits” we’d have been talking about the Grand Canyon.

So when Isaiah tells us the seraphim were calling out, “holy, holy, holy,” they were saying God isn’t just holy, and he isn’t just holy, holy, meaning really holy. They were saying God is as holy as it is possible to be. He is the ultimate in holiness. But what does that mean? What is God like when he is described as uber holy?

The Hebrew word for holy was from a root that meant to divide, cut or separate. Thus, saying God is holy means he is separate, divided out from something. But in what way is God separate? In Isaiah 40:25 God says, “To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.” The answer to those questions is no one. There is no one like God. In verse 26 he says, “Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these? He who brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of his great power and mighty strength not one of them is missing.” God created the stars, the sun, the moon, the earth and everything in the universe. Who else has done that or ever will do that? No one. God is totally unique. 1 Chronicles 17:20 says, “O Lord, there is none like you, nor is there any God besides you.” God is utterly separate from all that exists. There is nothing and no one else like him.

Think about New England Patriots’ qb Tom Brady. Do you know how many quarterbacks have won more than 1 Super Bowl? There are 12. Of those 12 multiple Super Bowl winners, eight have won two Super Bowls. One, Troy Aikman, won 3. Only 2, Terry Bradshaw and Joe Montana, have won 4 Super Bowls. And then there’s Tom Brady. He’s won six! That’s absurd. And his team will make the postseason again this year, meaning he has a chance at another one. And he’s doing that at 42 years old! Do you know how many Super Bowl quarterbacks have been older than 40? One, Tom Brady. There is no one like him.

That’s true in one sense. No one else has done what he has done. But you can compare him to others. Others have played quarterback like he has. We know how great he is by comparing him with others who are like him. He has played better, won more and has played to a greater age than anyone else. Yet we measure his greatness by comparing to others that are like him. What we need to understand about God is that there is no one to compare him to. There is no one and

nothing else in all that exists that is like him, but just not as great as him. He is in a category all by himself. He is holy, holy, holy.

I want to point out how God is completely separate, totally other, incomparable. One way is that he is sovereign over all. He rules over everything. Notice the seraphim called him the Lord God Almighty. Almighty means having all might, all power over everything. There can only be one being that rules over everything. If there were someone that could literally compete with him, then God would not rule everything. But there is no one in that category.

In Isaiah 46:9-10 the prophet relays this message from God. “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say, ‘My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.’” Who can do whatever he pleases? None of us can. We have physical limitations. We can’t run faster than a locomotive, we can’t leap tall buildings in a single bound, we can’t fly and we can’t lift thousands of pounds with a single hand. We have legal limitations. I can’t choose to violate laws at my own whim. There are tons of limits that keep us from doing whatever we choose. Only someone who has the power can do whatever he wants. That’s true of God. No one can stop him.

He says that he makes known what the end of all things is from the beginning. In other words, he has decided how it will turn out before it even starts. That’s because he is sovereign. His purpose, what he wants to happen, will happen, because no one is like him. He chooses what is going to happen before the world even starts, and it happens.

It is so easy for us to lose sight of this truth. But it is woven all the way through the Bible. Joseph’s brothers tried to do their worst to him, to get rid of him forever. They did him enormous harm. And God used their hateful attitude toward him and their inexcusable actions to put Joseph in a place of power that he could use to rescue his own family and sustain God’s plan to rescue the human race. Joseph would never have been in that position had it not been for the horrible actions of his brothers. God used their terrible rebellion to accomplish exactly what he wanted to happen.

After God promised Israel for centuries that he would send his Messiah to rescue them, when that Messiah finally showed up they not only rejected him, but they plotted to have him killed. And God used their rejection and their plot to kill him to accomplish the plan of rescue, which required that he be killed on our behalf! This was a plan thousands of years in the making. It involved absolute rebellion against God, and somehow he used that rebellion to achieve exactly what he had planned all along.

How often do your plans come out exactly the way you plotted them? I was thinking about that in regard to Christmas that we just celebrated. I've heard of some interesting approaches to buying gifts recently. In one case a person tells loved ones the exact items she wanted to receive and the places or websites to go to in order to get them. Really it was like she was ordering things. Another person just goes out and buys his own gift that he wants from his spouse without her being involved at all. Why do those things happen? Because our plans for buying gifts often just don't work out well at all. A loved one gave me a shirt she thought I'd like. As it turned out I did like it a lot. But it didn't fit. No problem, just exchange it for a different size. Oh, wait, the company that sells it has sold them all. There are no more. Good idea. Didn't work out. Welcome to the plans of humans.

God never has that happen. If God was giving the shirt it would fit, and if somehow it didn't fit I would try to take it back, discover that there were no more in my size, but in the process find a shirt I like a lot better in the perfect size. And it will be the shirt God intended for me to have all along.

Being a grandparent is wonderful. Our grandchildren are such a joy. But being Yapaw does include some challenges. What are grandparents supposed to do? Spoil the children, right? That's my plan. I don't want to discipline my grandchildren. That's their parents' job. I served my term as parental disciplinarian. I'm retired from it now. But their parents want us to maintain some discipline so that the kids aren't incorrigible after having been with us. But what do you do when the precious little ones don't cooperate? Recently we had one of those occasions when it was bed time and I had the responsibility to get Ella to brush her teeth. She decided she didn't want to do that, because she knew it was the precursor to going to bed, which she was determined to avoid. Now I had a problem. How do I get her to brush her teeth? I cooked up a plan. I used some clever reasoning with her, thinking all along it had no chance of working. To my surprise, she said, "Okay, Yapaw," then went and brushed her teeth. I told Laurie, "I didn't think that was going to work." What we need to understand is that God is never in a position where he thinks, "I didn't think that was going to work." His plan always works. In regard to everything in our lives, his plan is working. It may seem impossible that there is any plan or that if there is that it is working, just like it did with Joseph and with Jesus. But God's plan will always come out right.

But there is another aspect of God's holiness that is important for us to remember. God is also separate in another way. He is completely separate from all evil. There is nothing but pure good in him. There is no taint of evil, wrong or unrighteousness in him. 1 John 1:5 says, "This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all." How much darkness is there in light? There is none. Light is the antithesis of darkness. If it contains darkness, it isn't light. That is true of God. He is pure light with no alloy of any hint of

darkness. Psalm 18:30 says, “As for God, his way is perfect.” He is true, perfect good. We have never known anyone in whom there is a total absence of evil, but God is that person.

I may make some of you a little queasy with this next statement. The FDA says that it is impossible to keep defects out of all food. The process of growing, harvesting, processing and transporting food inevitably introduces some foreign matter into our food. There is no way to avoid it. These are defects that are unappetizing, but not harmful to us. So the FDA has limits on the amount of defects in food we eat. For instance, only 30 insect fragments are allowed in every 100 grams (about 3.5 ounces) of peanut butter! The limit for spaghetti is no more than 450 insect parts in a 16 ounce box of spaghetti. One quarter of a cup of cornmeal can have up to one whole insect in it!

The point is that there is some defect in everything we eat. You can’t get away from it. Nothing is absolute, 100% pure. But God is absolute good. There are zero parts per million of evil in him. None whatsoever. Everything he does is good. Everything he thinks is good and nothing but good. Everything he does is motivated by love, goodness and wisdom with no contamination of evil whatsoever.

In his book, *The Existence And Attributes Of God*, Stephen Charnock wrote that God “is a pure and unmixed light, free from all blemish in his essence, nature, and operations...It is a less injury to deny his being, than to deny the purity of it.” What this means is that God is utterly, totally trustworthy. We may not understand what he is allowing in our lives, we may not like it, but what we must always remember is that God is good, and that everything he does is driven by good and by love. So we can trust him even when we don’t comprehend what’s going on.

WE NEED TO SEE THE LORD’S GRACE

There is another aspect of God’s holiness that we have a hard time believing. It is an aspect of his character that has no parallel. It is so unique that we have trouble accepting that it is true. But it is absolutely true. That aspect is his grace. He has grace that is beyond anything we have ever experienced, imagined or hoped for.

Isaiah’s response to this exposure to the holiness of God is one we can relate to. It’s in verse 5. He says, “Woe to me. I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” He used lips to represent the expression of who he really was. He didn’t mean he got some dirt on his mouth. He meant his very being, the essence of his person, was unclean.

Many years ago Laurie and I drove up to LAX to pick up a relative who was flying in. The arrival time was at night. On the way to the airport we stopped to get some burritos for dinner. We were a bit pressed for time so we figured we’d just eat our burritos as we drove. So enjoyed

my burrito as we drove through the dark. I had no idea that as I was eating some grease leaked out of the burrito and dripped onto my shirt. In the dark I couldn't see it. I was dismayed when we got out of the car and walked into the terminal where it was light to see grease all over the front of my shirt. It looked really bad. In the dark I had no idea that it was there. But when I was exposed to the light it became obvious.

That's what happened to Isaiah. He knew that he wasn't perfect. But he tried his best. And he knew that he was certainly way better than some people. He was better than most for that matter. But then he was exposed to the pure, brilliant light of God, to his absolute holiness. And in today's vernacular he said, "Oh, no! I am so screwed." That searing light exposed all of the ugliness of his heart. In that moment he knew he was deserving of being totally blown away by God, for he was the definition of guilty and unacceptable.

Then an amazing thing happened. One of the seraphim flew to him with a live, burning coal, and put it to his lips, to his uncleanness. That represented him burning it away. The seraphim said in verse 6, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for." The problem of guilt was resolved by God. He burned it away.

An aspect of God's holiness, his pure goodness, is that driven by his total goodness and love he has made away for us to be forgiven. In Jesus Christ he has put that coal to our lips. He didn't say, "Oh, you're not that bad," or "well, at least you're not as bad as those guys." He saw how unclean our lips are, and he burned it away.

There was a time when Laurie wanted me to get my teeth whitened. We were about to go on vacation, and our dentist had offered to do a treatment for me that would whiten my teeth. This treatment involved shining UV light on my teeth. It had a very unfortunate side effect. I have had all my life a propensity for getting bad canker sores in my mouth. I found out that for some reason exposure to that much UV light causes canker sores. We were just about to go on a much needed and anticipated vacation and I got one of the worst canker sores I've ever had. It was excruciating. I knew it was going to utterly ruin our vacation because I was going to be miserable the entire time. Laurie called our dentist and told him what had happened. He felt terrible. He said, "Let me look into this and see if I can help." We had kind of resigned ourselves to suffer through it when he didn't call back in an hour or two because we had to fly out the next day. But that evening he called. He said, "I've got something that will help. Come by my office on your way to the airport tomorrow and I'll treat it." So that next morning we went to his office. He told me he had researched the problem and found what he needed to do was cauterize the sore. Uh, cauterize? That doesn't sound like fun. He said, "It's going to hurt. It will probably be sore for a day or two, but then it should get better." I gave him the okay, so he put a chemical on that sort that would cauterize it. You know that cauterizing means burning, right? I am proud of myself that I didn't scream, I didn't use the kind of words that would get a

kid's mouth washed with soap, I didn't get violent and I didn't cry like a little girl. But I wanted to do all of the above. The pain was intense. It was awful. But after a few minutes it reduced from unbearable to just painful. And amazingly within a couple of days it got way better, and didn't really bother me at all.

God had that angel cauterize Isaiah's uncleanness. And in Jesus Christ he cauterizes ours. He cauterizes all of it. He cauterizes every bit of it, from the deepest part of us, the part we can't even change. Psalm 103:12 says, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." Colossians 2:13 says, "When you were dead in your sin and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins." How many of our sins did he forgive? All of them. How many in the entirety of your life are left unforgiven, still to be paid for? None. Not one. Zero. And how did this happen? God did it. What did Isaiah do about his uncleanness? Nothing. God did it for him. And in Christ he did it for us.

APPLICATION

MAKE GOD'S CHARACTER THE FOUNDATION OF YOUR SECURITY

What ensured for Isaiah that somehow he would be all right and things in the world would turn out right? It was seeing the holiness of Almighty God. The same will be true for us.

We continually try to root our security in good circumstances. And as long as we do that we will never be at peace, because we all know that good circumstances are as permanent as soap bubbles. But God's character never changes. He was holy, Almighty and full of grace in all that he is and does 2800 years ago when Isaiah got a glimpse of his glory, and he is still holy, Almighty and full of grace today. He will be the same in 10,000 years. That is what makes us secure.

LET GO OF THE ILLUSION OF CONTROL

Pastor Daniel Schreiner, who is from Portland, Oregon, reports that he received an ad from a local fitness gym as the new year approached last year. It was headed with the words, "The Year Of You." It said the new year, "Is right around the corner and you're either going to own the year or the year is going to own you. It is 100% your choice. It's in your hands. That's the first thing. Simply by taking all of the responsibility and putting it on your shoulders you become empowered. Next, you take the feeling of empowerment, of invincibility, the feeling you can run through a wall, and you take action. You take action like you've never taken action before. You become prolific. You become consistent. And you let no obstacle stand in your way, no matter what. No more whining about anything. YOU are in control. YOU!"

Nice pep talk, I guess. Clearly it is aimed at getting people pumped up to sign up for that gym, determined to let nothing stand in the way. That's right. I am in control! I am invincible. And I'm lying to myself. I can't run through a wall. Obstacles do get in my way. And while I control a few things in this world, it is a joke to say I am in control. Proverbs 16:9 says, "In their hearts human plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." We may chart a course, but God decides where we go.

Have you seen the news stories about the tour helicopter that went down on the island of Kauai this past week! All 7 people on board were killed. Of the 7, 6 had zero control over what happened. The pilot had some control, but obviously not total, but the other 6 were tourists, riding along to see the sights, when that helicopter flew into a mountain. They did not control that. They could not prevent it. I guess they could have prevented it by never getting on the helicopter in the first place, but you get the point that we control very little. When we think we are in control we fill our lives with fear and stress, we become difficult for other people to deal with, and we will never have a moment's peace.

Let's acknowledge that we really only control our own choices, but we do not control the outcome of those choices. We can choose to be faithful to God and do our best. Then we must consciously let go of the outcome. We must say to the Lord, as Jesus did, "not my will, but yours." If we do that, our souls can find some rest, for we know that God is holy, he is good.

LIVE IN GRACE

Remember, your lips have been cauterized. In his grace, God has burned away all the guilt you will ever have. So now you can say, with Isaiah, "Here am I. Send me." But that means letting go of all the stuff in the past. It means seeing all the failures, all the disappointments, all the weaknesses, all the sins as having been cauterized by God.

Since 2006 there has been a celebration in Times Square in New York at New Year's called "Good Riddance Day." Participants write down hard, painful or embarrassing memories from the past year and throw them into an industrial strength shredder. One of the organizers says we have a need to say, "You know what? I'm going to let go of the things that have been dragging me down and going to look forward with a sense of hope...this is a chance to detox in a big way."

God's holiness and grace provide a theological basis for Good Riddance Day. As you approach this new year, perhaps you might write down the failures, the disappointments, the losses of this past year, then throw them in the trash. Or burn them! They have been cauterized, so you can begin this new year free of them.