

I

Click. Click. Click.

I stood in awed silence as the soldier, in his impeccable dress uniform, marched 21 perfect steps. He shouldered his rifle and stood stock still for 21 seconds, and then click, click, click, he marched another 21 perfect steps again as he stood guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns at Arlington National Cemetery just across the river from Washington, D.C.

Then, at the top of the hour, the changing of the guard ceremony began. The precision in the movements of the soldiers, the crispness of their salutes, the bearing with which they held themselves, the sense of honor and duty and shared sacrifice that came over the crowd at that hallowed space was something I'll never forget.

And once the new sentinel was posted, the changing of the guard was complete, and the new sentinel began his watch with detailed precision. Click. Click. Click.

II

To be human is to live through a long series of transitions and changes. A child is born, and life takes on a brand new dimension. An educational or career opportunity brings with it a relocation to another community. The natural process of aging necessitates a move into an assisted living facility. This human life is one that is full of transitions, full of a "changing of the guard," so to speak.

And we hope that those transitions happen with all of the precision and attention to detail and sense of honor and duty as the Changing of the Guard at the Tomb of the Unknowns. We hope that when those life transitions come along, they are measured and timed down to the second.

But we know that most of the time, life is not like that. Most of the time, transitions are often messy and stressful and even a bit chaotic.

The moving truck gets delayed, and so you spend several nights camping on the floor in your new house.

Your department gets merged with another, and there's confusion and territorialism in the office.

A loved one dies, and the surviving family has different ideas about funeral plans and settling out the estate.

An election is held, and the airwaves and the social media feeds are full of vitriol and accusations and anything but a shared sense of honor and duty.

Most of the time, the transitions we go through in this life are messy and chaotic. And for those of us who are people of faith, we find ourselves asking, "In in the midst of all of this chaos and messiness, can God still be counted upon?"

And that brings us to our story for this morning.

III

This Fall we've been doing a high-level overview of the Old Testament. And thus far, we've learned that about 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus, an Israelite king named David united the 12 tribes of Israel into one unified nation and established the city of Jerusalem as its capital. David's son Solomon oversaw the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, and under King Solomon, the unified independent nation of ancient Israel reached the peak of its political, military, and economic power.

But it didn't last long. In fact, as soon as Solomon's son King Rehoboam ascended to the throne, a civil war broke out, and the unified nation of Israel split in two. Ten of the original twelve tribes formed the Northern Kingdom and took the name Israel, and set up the city of Samaria as their capital.

The tribes of Benjamin and Judah formed the southern kingdom and took the name Judah, and kept Jerusalem as their capital city.

Because of its strategic position at the eastern end of the Mediterranean basin and because of the trade routes that connect Europe, Africa, and Asia, the Holy Land has always been coveted by the world's superpowers. And when the civil war broke out between the northern and southern kingdoms, the neighboring nations saw an opportunity.

The northern kingdom of Israel was under a grave threat from their powerful neighbors to the northeast, the

Assyrians, whose military power at the time was unrivaled in the world. And as I mentioned a few weeks ago, the political situation within the northern kingdom itself was terribly unstable. Something like 40 different kings ruled over the northern kingdom in less than two centuries, and eight of them died by assassination.

By comparison, things in the southern kingdom of Judah were a bit more stable. In fact, King Uzziah of Judah reigned on the throne in Jerusalem for 52 years. And when he died, there was a tremendous sense of unease among the people of Judah. The divided kingdom was weakened from within by infighting and political intrigue. There were growing threats from abroad, particularly in the form of the Assyrians. The changing of the guard, so to speak, was promising to be anything but smooth and precise.

And so that brings us to our text for this morning – the story of the call of the prophet Isaiah. He's most likely in Jerusalem. It's 740 years before the birth of Christ, and King Uzziah of Judah has just died after a reign of 52 years. With that background in mind, listen now for a Word from God.

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!”

Isaiah’s vision came to him in the year that King Uzziah died, in a year of transition and change and upheaval.

IV

My friend, I don’t know what kind of transition you’re living through right now, but my guess is that it’s more messy and chaotic than it is precise and orderly. And as you’re watching the news or scrolling through your social media feeds, it’s full of noise about recounts and lawsuits and just plain ugliness. And so maybe you’re asking, “Where is God in the middle of this mess?”

I hope you caught some of the vision of the prophet Isaiah this morning. Isaiah sees the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty above all of the plotting and scheming of the fallen powers and principalities of this world, and the heavenly host sings, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The other night, I happened to be standing in my backyard. The night was cool and crisp, the moon wasn’t yet out, and I looked up, and the stars were so bright and beautiful.

And as I looked at them, I remembered a conversation I once had with my friend Steve who was an aeronautical engineer and who once tried to teach me about quantum physics. Most of it was over my head, but as I understand it, the basic idea of quantum physics is that everything in the universe is in motion all the time. So as I stood there still looking up into the stars, even though it seemed from my vantage point that backyard that they were fixed in the sky, both the stars and I are moving.

And I don’t know about you, but that thought makes me a little queasy. The notion that everything is always moving and changing all the time makes me feel like I’m on a wild ride at Six Flags and getting a little woozy. My life, your life, our national life, indeed the entire cosmos might indeed be spinning and twirling and chaotic and making us all feel a little queasy this morning.

My friend Steve died suddenly just a few years ago. And I like to think that Steve and Isaiah have already had some fascinating conversations. Because Isaiah reminds us that there is a fixed point in the grand scheme of things, high above it all. Isaiah reminds us that through all of the tumult of the nations, through all of the messy transitions of our lives, God remains on the throne. God is the fixed point in the universe to which we can hold ourselves when everything else seems to be spinning so chaotically.

And here's the gospel part of Isaiah's vision, my friend. Not only is the Lord high and lofty and far beyond our imagining, surrounded and attended by the heavenly host.

The Lord also knows you. The Lord knows what's going on in your life, right at this very moment. The Lord knows what sort of transition you're facing. The Lord knows your triumphs and your struggles. The Lord knows all the good, and all the bad.

And the Lord comes to you and says, "I have touched your lips. I have blotted out your sin. Not because of what you've said or not said, not because of what you've done or not done. Not because of where you come from or who your people are or anything that has anything to do with your own merit. I have come and touched you and blotted out your sin because you are mine, and I love you. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you. There's nothing I wouldn't give for you, including my one and only Son."

Oftentimes we think of prophets as some sort of sooth-sayers or fortune-tellers. And there's an element of that to some of the prophets we read in the Bible. But the basic job description of a prophet is to call God's people back to following God's ways of being in the world when they've lost their way.

Sometimes, prophets are sent to kings, like Elijah was sent to Ahab. Sometimes, prophets are sent to foreign nations, like Jonah was sent to Nineveh.

But God is still sending prophets to this very day. Sometimes, God's prophets are sent into classrooms. Sometimes, God's prophets are sent into offices. Sometimes, God's prophets are sent into city halls and state capitol buildings. Sometimes, God's prophets are sent wherever it is that the people of God happen to be gathering.

V

And to borrow an old phrase from a military recruiting poster, even now, right at this very moment, God is looking for a few good women and men.

God sees the chaos that is unfolding in our world. God sees how the people of God have turned from following God's ways of being in the world and gone after idols. God sees how the poor and the outcast are being mistreated and abused.

And God is saying, Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?

Who will have the courage to speak up when a racist comment is

made around the water cooler? Who will speak up when the Word of God is used as a weapon, rather than as bread for the hungry? Who will find the courage to love, when it's so easy to hate?

Who will be the prophet of God not just in the Sunday School rooms of our nation, but in its boardrooms and locker rooms and living rooms? Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?

You and I, we are people of unclean lips. We live among a people of unclean lips. But God has touched us. In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, God has blotted out our sin and removed our guilt.

So whom shall God send? Who will go and be a prophet of God this day?

Here I am, Lord, send me.

Here we are, Lord. Send us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.