

Preparation Required

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome to another sermon on the web from St. John's Shaughnessy Anglican Church in Vancouver, Canada.

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The following message is from the January 28, 2001 service at St. John's Shaughnessy. The Rev. Steve James delivered his message from Isaiah chapter 6.

The title of the message is Preparation Required. It's lovely to be with you again and I think we have to be kind to one another.

We have to say that none of us have changed over seven years. Would we please do that and suspend reality just for a moment? Would you please in your Bibles, if you've got them I think in front of you, turn to Isaiah chapter 6, page 604.

[1 : 2 3] We're going to be looking at this passage to help us understand what an encounter with the living God is really like. I said shall we suspend reality?

Is that what actually happens on a Sunday morning? I hope not. But is the real world tomorrow? If you're American, is the real world unknown about now as time?

Super Bowl starts, I think. Is it happening now? Let's go home. Let's go. Is Christianity something that is nice for Sunday but when you come to Monday it's just too hard to believe?

It just goes so much against the way that the rest of society thinks. It's hard, isn't it, to go against the grain. I've been in my church, St. Andrew's Bebbington, for about three months when we had our 900th anniversary.

Been going for 900 years. Nothing has changed in 900 years. Now a few things had. And we had royalty. We had Princess Margaret. And, you know, she's not very well at the moment.

[2 : 4 2] But we're delighted to have her. And I welcomed her at the gate. And we walked into the church. And I was introducing various parts of the church to her. And I said to her, And, Mom, this door here is 900, some of the stones here are 900 years old.

This is the old door. And she said to me, I think it's that door. So I said, Mom, I think it's this door.

And she said, I'm getting on dangerous ground here. And she says, I think it's that door. And then she turned to me and said, How long have you been here for? So I said, Mom, three months.

It's that door. You don't argue with royalty, you see. You just don't argue with royalty. And King Isaiah was the king.

And Isaiah was the prophet. Very easy to confuse the two. But Isaiah just felt differently about the nation than King Isaiah. He kind of argued with royalty. He kind of felt that this society is not going very well.

[3 : 48] Everybody thought under King Isaiah that things were great. The economy was really good. Who was it who said it's the economy stupid? That's the thing that matters, isn't it? They'd won wars. It was never better than it was in the days of Solomon. And everybody thought, We've got a great life. It's going so well.

And Isaiah saw things differently. It's the other door. It's not like that. He begins, or rather the first recorded words of Isaiah, are way back in chapter 1.

And I'll read them to you. They are these. Hear, O heavens! Give ear, O earth! Calls heaven and earth to listen.

Sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner. The ass knows the master's crib.

[4 : 46] But Israel does not know. My people does not understand. I hope it never happens to you that such a thing would happen with your own children.

But these things do happen. That children go off and they do their own thing. And it's very painful. But as I was telling a story last night about some lost car keys, and I won't go into it, except simply to say that on these lost car keys that I had was my name.

And on each person is a kind of signature. That's how God sees you. Made by God, your Heavenly Father. And when there is no relationship, he agonizes like this.

They do not know me. They do not know me. Now that's what Isaiah saw. Now you might be one of those people saying, I don't think I know God.

It's a dangerous thing because what happens is if you have... The way that things are is that there is God and us and our community.

[5 : 57] And if we take God out of the equation, we have no other to relate to. And so what happens is that we simply get concerned about ourselves. Our self implodes upon itself.

And that's what Isaiah saw. People with a kind of a head knowledge for God but not really relating to God and imploding upon themselves. So if you read chapter 5 in Isaiah, you see him saying, Woe.

Woe to you. All these things are happening. It is not the good life. It is the destructive life. There's a lovely little bit in Isaiah chapter 5.

I'll read it to you. Talks about the very first woe in verse 8. Woe to those who join house to house and add field to field. I can imagine that they were getting so fed up with their neighbours who'd built a massive house next door to them or whatever it was.

They go, I'm not having that anymore. I'm going to buy the house next door on this side and buy the house that door next side. I'm going to be fine. Nobody's going to bother me. I'm staying in Chicago at the moment and I'm living in what I call Michael Jordan land because he's just up the road.

[7 : 04] He and I are neighbours which is great. I know him. He doesn't know me yet. Which I'm a bit disappointed about and I was thinking maybe I might just go and knock on his door or knock on the gate that's in front of the other gate that's in front of the other gate to get to him.

He doesn't know his neighbours and I know he's got lots of friends but when we say to ourselves and I don't want anybody to bother me we just find that actually that sort of concentration on how I want to feel just destroys my relationships with other people.

And that's the way that it is when we don't have God to pull us out of ourselves. So Isaiah sees this world. This is the world in which he lives. And you may say to yourself I'm not a person who understands God so maybe I'm that kind of person.

I don't know. Or you may be somebody who says I think Isaiah's probably right. But the trouble is I keep saying it's this door and everybody else says it's that door. I find it very hard to actually hold a course for God in my life.

In fact actually Steve if I were being honest to you I would say though I believe it on Sunday but Monday to Saturday I don't.

[8 : 15] I'm kind of split level in the way I am with my kind of faith. If I could call it a faith. Well Isaiah himself has an essential encounter that helps him to minister to this kind of difficult situation where everybody is going in one direction and he is going in another direction and it's an encounter with the living God and it is what you and I need if we are going to say hang on a minute everybody there is a God and somehow we need to be going in another direction.

We have to have an encounter with the living God and that's what he has in Isaiah chapter 6. It's called his vision or his call but I'm just simply going to call it an encounter. What are the marks of a true encounter?

There are four and everyone is brief I promise. the first one is that you recognise your place when you come to encounter God.

Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up and his train fills the temple. Now the train I imagine was the end of his cloak had a robe it would be a lot longer than this but it would be as if this little bit hanging out here just filled the temple.

amazing just the end of his garment. He had a sense of the proportion of things.

[9 : 38] Now I've been watching the news recently and I've discovered that there are power shortages in California and I think there are some good things about this I know that they haven't paid you for their power yet but I hope that fixes itself but one of the good things about having a power shortage is if the lights go off at night you can see the stars and that's good because you get a sense of the proportion of things you suddenly recognize where you are we have a little house in North Wales and we go up into the mountains and we can see the stars we get a sense of proportion for things but it's bigger than that it's recognizing God is God the story goes of a scientist who very proud of himself and he's a male scientist he went to Saint Peter and said we've done it we have created a human being out of dust we've done it just like you

God and they said this to Saint Peter he said Saint Peter would you go in and tell God that this is what we have done we're brilliant you know this is amazing well Saint Peter goes into the throne room and then he comes out ten minutes later and he says God is not impressed I said why not you know we've made a human being out of the dust and Saint Peter says God says you've got to make your own dust let's think about that for a moment it's quite something isn't it an encounter with the living God where we recognize that God is God he is there he is living and I suddenly see my smallness but it's not only that secondly it's a conviction that God is moral and holy and I am not the first words that Isaiah says in Isaiah chapter 6 is woe is me now he'd been preaching to the society around him and he'd been saying woe to them woe to them woe to them and suddenly he realizes he's mixed up in the whole thing woe is me

I'm right in the middle of this I am what we call in churches a sinner it's kind of hard to recognize that you're a sinner until God really reveals it to you it's not a bad thing I'll get to that in a moment I heard a story of a young boy who his friend had marbles do you play with marbles you know those are what and he said to his friend if you had 5,000 marbles would you give me half of your marbles marbles and the friend would you give me half of your marbles yeah sure I would if you had a hundred would you give me yeah I would if you had two would you give me half of your marbles marbles and the friend said that's not fair you know I've only got two marbles you know when it comes down to the reality of things you know you see how you are really we had a petrol crisis a gas crisis a petrol you know car petrol thing back in in October and you know we all thought that we were decent moral upright citizens but it affected the food chain and we saw people coming out of the supermarkets with twelve loaves of bread now who was going to eat twelve loaves of bread they were panicking panic buying when it comes down to it number one rules now Isaiah woe is me he said but he said woe is me for I'm a man of unclean lips now you may be aware of far greater faults than what you might say he says

I'm a man of unclean lips and what he means by that is I am a preacher and what matters to me is this what I say and yet the very essence of who I am is unclean now that's really striking at the heart of that person the very heart of who you are that you feel this is my identity I'm unclean now let me say that this is not a bad experience it is in fact and you may this may sound very strange a wonderful thing to be able to recognize your failures Saint Augustine once said happy sin I want a quote from Eugene Peterson who is nearly always right on these things he said this in the Christian life our task is not to avoid sin which is impossible anyway but to recognize it this is where the grace of God comes into a person's life oh so that's what I'm like ok

I can deal with that or rather God can deal with it that is the second thing that happens you realize what you are you have a proper proportion of things you come face to face with who you are but Christian life is not about guilt it is about forgiveness from guilt and this is the third point it is about grace a wonderful thing happens to Isaiah as he is going through this experience an angel picks up a burning coal from the altar and places it on his lips and all of that is very symbolic and I haven't got time to explain most of it to you now the altar is the place of sacrifice there is an altar between heaven and earth that we know now in the New Testament and that is the cross of Jesus Christ it is how we meet God through that altar through the death of Jesus Christ and what he did for us was to atone for or cover our sin I was in a line up for coffee at

[16:13] Trinity Evangelical Divinity School which is where I'm having my sabbatical and had this coffee and somebody said it's covered it's paid for now how does that work well there is a group called Discovering Christianity you can understand how it is that Christ pays for all of your failure but he does and it is a wonderful thing he actually takes all of the blame so that you are never blamed the experience of grace is fundamental to an encounter with a living God I don't know if you ever want to have that but I found it and I found it to reinforce yes who God is but I actually found that God actually in forgiving and accepting me valued me beyond everything everything the sign that it had all happened was that God who seemed so far and distant high and lifted up he could now hear very soon after

I became a Christian I took a Bible on the underground train every day to Liverpool street station I was still a young Christian and slightly ashamed of being a Christian so I covered it with a brown paper envelope I think they thought it was some Lady Chatterley's lover I don't know what they thought it was but anyway it wasn't it was a Bible and I was reading it and I read the whole of Matthew's gospel I just couldn't stop and I was beginning to understand it and I got to the end of it when Jesus I'm with you forever to the end of the age and I was bursting into tears in the middle of the underground station it was quite something I found that I could hear and what I found was that God was saying as he does who will go for us us in the plural of the Trinity here am I Lord send me there is a very famous singer I don't know if Ed Norman knows of Benjamin Luxon but he's a very famous baritone who went deaf and he knew that it had all gone wrong when he was singing in front of everybody and the audience were wincing he was three tones out but through a very special hearing aid where he could pick up the resonances of the music he had begun to hear again

I tell you that story because it may be that you did have a Christian experience at one stage in your life and have lost it and want to hear again time is going God gives him a job and we'll just be brief on this but this is really actually what the chapter is all about the job is a horrible job it is to be a preacher where everybody falls asleep please do not do that they all their hearts of the people grow fat and their ears heavy heavy they shut their eyes lest they see with their eyes they are not going to listen to you your job is to be an unsuccessful preacher your voice is going to send people to sleep until the land is ravaged and there is the Assyrians come in what the Assyrians do is kind of do an indiscriminate logging of the land it is utterly desolate and all these all these things are chopped away so there is nothing left except stumps in the land stumps in the land that's going to be what your life is going to be like

Isaiah you are going to be preaching and trying to live a faithful life and it's going to look as if you failed and it's going to be but I want to tell you Isaiah that actually one of those stumps is the holy stump now Peterson has written a lovely article on this and out of that holy stump is going to come the stem of Jesse chapter 11 in Isaiah if you don't know and that stem of Jesse is the Messiah you are going to have a ministry that doesn't look successful but actually it is going to be very fruitful in the end just keep going it doesn't matter if your life looks a failure once you have had an encounter with God and I am working in you I use your failures please believe that I don't feel I have been a successful pastor of St.

Andrews Bebbington don't tell them that please but I don't know that I have been successful I just want to be faithful to it and I know that God will make it fruitful that will sustain me because God has called me as he calls each one of us to follow him well you can see there is a message for two kinds of people if you are a believer a Christian and you think I can keep going then look at the second half of the chapter but if you are somebody who has come to St.

[21 : 49] John's this morning and you are thinking what is this all about well I would love you to have an encounter with a living God these are the marks I've mentioned them you will get a right proportion of things you will have a conviction that all is not well but it's all right because you will have a great experience of grace and you will begin to understand and hear what God is saying to you that experience of grace is fundamental to what it means to be a Christian and I finish with this particular story of what it is like what it feels like to know the grace of God in England we sometimes have offers in our supermarkets in this particular supermarket they had an offer and when you got to the checkout desk you were given kind of scratch cards and you could scratch it out with a coin and there would be an offer five pounds off your purchase or maybe it would read ten pounds off your purchase or just if you're really lucky it says the whole trolley free now a bachelor went into the supermarket and the typical bachelor thing he brought a loaf of bread and some toothpaste no planning just those two things and he went and bought them and he was in the line up and he picked up his scratch card just about to come to the checkout lady and he scratched it out and he looked at it and it said the whole trolley free he thought to himself oh no now as he was there he looked at the person behind him somebody he'd never met before in his life and this was a mum he kind of guessed maybe it was a single mum you know the kids were hanging off the trolley their socks were not sorted socks they were different pumps whatever you call them sneakers everything was dirty the trolley was piled full she was harassed and stressed he'd never met her before in his life he looked at his scratch card and he looked at her and he said never met her before and he said to the checkout lady very loudly darling our luck is in that is the experience of grace do you see your luck is in you've come to church this morning what's it like to know your luck is in you have a chance to know the grace of God it is a wonderful thing don't worry about what you believe about God just discover what he believes about you it's wonderful

Carly will give you an offer to join a group do it never get a better chance and you'll know you will know your luck yeah your luck is in as you encounter the living God well we're going to pray I'd like you to bow your heads I will say one brief prayer and then something will happen maybe some music or something as we pray oh God our heavenly father perhaps we didn't know you were our father as we found the whole concept of father too difficult to cope with but we understand what grace means and deep down Lord we want it deep grace into our souls this morning help us to know you for the first time help us to know you afresh help us to live in this grace in Jesus name

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