

“Are you the stump?” Isaiah 6:1-13

“In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” “He said, “Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.” Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said: “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.” The holy seed is its stump.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Isaiah saw the Holy Lord Yahweh! **“I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:**

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost!” How terrifying, how devastating the experience of God’s holiness! **“Woe, I am lost!”**

Do you realise that we repeat these same words “holy, holy, holy” every time the Triune God gathers us for His Holy Meal? Why do we say them? Because the same holy God is present with all His angels and archangels in the Divine Meal that Jesus serves us.

Imagine, if our eyes were opened and we could see what Isaiah saw, hear what he heard, smell what he smelt and experienced the awe and terror that he experienced. If we survived such revelation of God’s holiness, how would we react? What do you think? Just as Isaiah cried in desperation: **“Woe is me! For I am lost!”**

If we indeed were able to see how the Holy God is present in our midst in the Divine Service, as Isaiah saw it, we would also experience God’s underserved mercy when His holiness touches our lips and the Gospel of forgiveness and life is declared:

“Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

This is the reality of the Divine Service. The Holy Lord Himself is present, He cleanses and purifies us with His holy body and blood in the Sacrament, His voice declares His forgiveness, we are restored, renewed, filled with God’s Spirit. This is the divine reality of the Lord’s Holy Meal for us. Awe-inspiring and overwhelming.

Then we hear God’s gentle voice: **“Who shall we send, who will go for us?”** Please, notice! That is an invitation, not a deal. “I did this for you, now, can you do this for me?” A gentle invitation. Our Holy God has rescued you from the slavery to sin and from sure death, He has sacrificed Himself to make you His own by paying the highest price imaginable, He has poured His grace and forgiveness over you, and now He gently asks: **“Who will go for us?”** Will you go for your Lord? Will you be His messenger?

Brothers and Sisters, our Triune God has done all of this for us, more, He has sent His Spirit to dwell in us, so that we can begin to comprehend what undeserved divine gifts we have received, and He has welcomed us in fellowship with Him.

If we have truly experienced God’s grace, not just heard about it, not just believed that that is true, if He has indeed touched your lips with His holiness and given us new hearts, then our new hearts are restless to respond: **“Here I am, send me! Send me, Lord!”**

If that happens, it is so beautiful, but then we are immediately faced with something so distressing. This is what happened to Isaiah, this is what we witness today, this is a part and parcel of our Christian life here in this wonderful, but fallen world.

Remember, what kind of message Isaiah was sent to deliver? The most beautiful news, here are just a few reminders of what Isaiah proclaimed. That our Lord will gather all the nations to Himself, that the people who walk in darkness will see a great light. That God speaks to you: “Comfort, comfort my people!”

Then the Suffering Servant who takes upon Himself our sins. God’s invitation to come and buy food and drink without money and without price. The restoration of the entire creation. Finally, the promise of the New Heavens and New Earth!

That’s the message! Incredible, magnificent, breathtaking promises of our Holy God! This is why Isaiah is often called the fifth evangelist. Because of the beauty and comfort of His message, because of the abundance of joy and hope in it.

But our message is even more beautiful, more magnificent! Isaiah only foretold; we have the message about how most of what Isaiah prophesied has been fulfilled. For our benefit and for the benefit of everyone. And here we come to what is so distressing.

Isaiah was sent, as are we, with this divine message, the Great News, the most joyful message. But what was and what is peoples’ reaction when they hear God’s message? This is what Isaiah was warned about, that was going to happen.

We know that these words are really important, for Jesus Himself and the apostles quote them again and again. **“Go, and say to this people: “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people dull,**

and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.”

We are, indeed, sent with the most beautiful message, with the life-giving words of God, but when people hear God’s message – what happens? Many, or should we say most of them, hear but don’t understand, see but don’t perceive.

Their hearts become duller and duller, and instead of turning to the Triune God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the very source of these Great News and of eternal promises, they turn against those who bring them this eternal life-giving message.

We can only cry out: “What a mysterious depth of our sin!” Is there anyone among us who hasn’t experienced this in your own life, from those whom we love?! When we try to bring them the most beautiful Gospel of Jesus Christ, the invitation from the Triune God, but their hearts become dull.

The scary mystery of our sinfulness... How can people reject the Lord of Life?! But that is true not just about those outside the Church. It is also true about us. Yes, about us. Where is our passion for the Lord? Where is our gladness and gratitude for all His gifts and blessings? Do we care about His gentle invitation? Do we care to stand up for what is true and good and beautiful? Do we have guts?

Do we step forward and offer ourselves, our very lives to the Lord: “Here I am! Send me! Use me for Your purposes as You will!” Do we? Too often we seem to be stuck deep in this swamp of lukewarmness and indifference, and we just struggle to get out of it.

Thus, faithful Christians cry out to the Lord in despair: “How long, Lord?! When are people finally going to listen to Your message? My parents, my children, my family, my dear friends? When? What should we do for that to happen?!” Isaiah too asked in distress: **“How long, O Lord?”** This is the frightening answer the Lord gave.

“Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land. And though a tenth remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump.”

This is what the power of our proclamation is like. Terrifying! The Word of the Lord does not return without accomplishing its purpose. If we listen and obey, He gives us a new life, eternal life. The Word accomplishes His purposes.

If we reject and ignore Him, if we are indifferent or prideful, then our hearts are made dull, our ears heavy, our eyes blind and sooner or later we are laid waste, cities, churches and congregations. The Word of God accomplishes His purposes.

Whatever sad and heartbreaking this is, but that is what we as Christians experience in this world. This is what we see around us today. Dull hearts, heavy ears, blind eyes. Indifference and rejections. Among our loved ones. Witnessing that, the first reaction may be to feel disheartened: “How long, Lord, will we spend in this spiritual wasteland?”

Brothers and Sisters, remember the last verse that we read: **“The holy seed is the stump”**. Who is He speaking about? You are that stump. Those who remain by God’s grace. You are the holy seed that the Spirit spoke about. You are that miracle of true faith and trust and obedience in the midst of an ever-darkening world.

Yes, we may wonder whether the Lord will bless our efforts, our message, will our congregations grow and flourish again? Will there be a new season of God’s grace? Will we be able to rejoice and celebrate the renewal of God’s Church?

Will our eyes see multitudes of repentant, forgiven and overjoyed brothers and sisters brought into God’s family? I don’t know the answer, it is not given to us, and probably there are good reasons for that.

Sure, we don’t know what the future will bring, but there are things that we do know for sure. Such as... Every time when our Holy God gathers us, when we respond and come together to celebrate His Holy Meal, we are in the presence of the Holy God and we praise Him together with the seraphim and with heavenly hosts: “Holy, holy, holy is our Lord!”

And then our Lord Himself feeds those who are His own with His life-giving Word, with His true body and blood, without money, without price. He graciously purifies and cleanses you, forgives you and restores you, and fills you with His Spirit.

This is what we know for sure. All of this is given to those who listen to Him. He is faithful and He will not withdraw His presence from those who love Him and long to be with Him. He will remain with us here until He takes us to Himself.

The world is what it is, the people of the world are what they are. But you are His chosen people, the holy stump, chosen before the foundation of the world, called and invited to be holy and blameless in Jesus Christ, and His blood washes you clean, dresses you in God’s festive garments and prepares for the eternal feast that is to come.

This we know. For certain. To this we can say, yes, amen!

Now, let’s go as His people, as children of God the Father, as siblings of our Lord Jesus. For you have heard His voice. He has filled you with His Spirit of joy and peace. Go overflowing with gladness for what Jesus has done for you and prepared for you! Go burning with the desire to share His life-giving message! Go being at peace, knowing that our message may be rejected, and often is!

Go with boldness knowing what the power of the Word of God is like – it enlightens and makes blind; it kills and it makes alive. It is up to those who listen to God’s message to choose how to respond – to accept God’s incredible gifts, or to reject the Lord of Life.

We hear the voice of the Triune God today just Isaiah did: **“Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?”** I pray that we all gladly respond to this voice and declare our gratitude and commitment: **“Here I am, Lord! Send me! Send us!”** And if we do, the Lord may choose to bless us more than we know or can imagine.

Amen.