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October 24th: Isaiah 6 & Mark 6:30-56

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Isaiah's vision and prophetic commission. Feeding the five thousand and walking on the water.

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Transcript

Isaiah chapter 6. 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 threshold 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.

And 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 inhabitants, 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 remain 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. In Isaiah chapter 6 we find something that many have identified as a prophetic call narrative, related to accounts that we find in places like Jeremiah chapter 1 and Ezekiel chapters 1-3.

In Jeremiah chapter 1 verses 4-10 we read of Jeremiah's installation as a prophet for the nation of Judah. Now the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you, I appointed you a prophet to the nations. Then I said, Our lord God, behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth.

But the Lord said to me, Do not say, I am only a youth, for to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, declares the Lord. Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.

See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. In that chapter the Lord proceeds to assure Jeremiah of the effectiveness that the words that he has placed upon Jeremiah's lips will have. He declares the judgment that is about to come upon the nation of Judah from the north, the way that Jeremiah will be empowered for his mission, and how his message will be received and responded to.

Verses 17-19 But you dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. As in Isaiah, Jeremiah's mouth and lips are prepared for speech. In Ezekiel's call, like Isaiah, he witnesses a theophanic vision, and he is given a scroll to eat.

Moses also has a theophanic vision and a prophetic commission in Exodus chapters 3 and 4. However, while the passages describing Jeremiah and Ezekiel's prophetic calls open their respective books, Isaiah's is found six chapters in. And this puzzles many

commentators, as chapters 6 verse 1 to 8 has many of the expected features of an inaugural commission. The prophet's lips are prepared, and he is given an outline of his mission and the results that it would have.

Commentators have, in many cases, sought an explanation for this in speculative reconstructions of the redaction history of the text, in the different historical layers of its composition. It is hypothesized by some, for instance, that the call narrative, along with chapters 7 to 8, was part of a single document and so was kept with them, even though it might better have been situated at the beginning of the book. John Oswald remarks upon the fact that many of those advancing this theory are the same as those who argue that this supposedly inserted section has broken up material in the chapters that bracket it.

Far better, Oswald suggests, to place far less emphasis upon doubtful reconstructions and to focus instead upon the final canonical form of the text and the call narrative in its actual situation. Another important consideration here is that, despite similarities with inaugural call narratives, there are also similarities with the vision of the divine council given by the prophet Micaiah in 1 Kings 22 verses 19-22. And Micaiah said, Therefore hear the word of the Lord.

I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left. And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him.

And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed. Go out and do so.

Rather than reading Isaiah chapter 6 as the account of Isaiah's initial call, it might be better understood as the account of a special commissioning in which he receives a more extensive and prominent task, although he is already a prophet at the beginning of it. The vision is dated to the year of King Uzziah's death, and it is a glorious vision of the Lord, exalted and enthroned in his temple. We ought to remember that the temple, literally the palace, and especially the Holy of Holies, was the symbolic throne room of the Lord.

The Lord was enthroned upon the cherubim, with the Ark of the Covenant being like his footstool. The date of King Uzziah's death is uncertain, and determining it depends heavily upon larger schemes of chronology that we follow. Some suggest 742 BC, others a date several years later.

There seems to be more than a narrow concern for dating present here, though. The death of King Uzziah, after a 52-year, largely prosperous and militarily successful reign,

represented a key point of transition to a time of national insecurity and threat. As the old king dies, however, the Lord – the word here is not Yahweh, but Lord, Master or Sovereign – is seen exalted upon his throne.

Human kings will fall, but the throne of the Lord endures. Judah's sovereignty is about to collapse, but God's is unrivalled and over all. In the inaugural vision of Ezekiel, he also saw the Lord enthroned on the divine throne chariot.

Ezekiel's description of the Lord focused upon the lower and upper body of the enthroned figure, shrouded in glory and also in metaphor. In Exodus chapter 24, it is the pavement beneath the throne that is most in view. In Uzziah's vision, it is the train of the Lord's robe at the level of his feet that is especially focused upon.

Along with the enthroned Lord, Uzziah saw seraphim above him. The seraphim, literally the burning ones, are described as having six wings, two covering their faces, two covering their feet and two with which they flew. The feet here might possibly be a euphemistic reference to genitals.

Whatever it is, they shield themselves from the glory of the Lord and cover their modesty. They seem to have some human-like features, faces, hands and feet, but the more specific character of the seraphim is difficult to ascertain. We don't have them described anywhere else in scripture.

Elsewhere in scripture, the term is used in relation to the fiery serpents in Numbers chapter 21 and the bronze serpent that Moses erects in response to that plague. In contrast to those, however, we are not told that the burning ones here in Isaiah chapter 6 are serpents. However, in Isaiah chapter 14 verse 29, we encounter the same terminology.

They are clearly used in relation to a serpent. It is likely that we should imagine the seraphim here as flying serpentine figures with some human limbs and features. Several scholars relate them to Egyptian images of winged uriy, serpent-like creatures associated with gods and pharaohs.

As flying fiery serpents, they are also akin to living lightning bolts. The seraphim called Antiphoneli, declaring the holiness of the Lord, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory.

The Lord is the thrice-holy God, enthroned above all other powers, whose majesty pervades his creation. The seraphim pronounced the utter incomparability of the Lord, his set-apartness and his consuming presence. And the temple in Isaiah's vision responds.

The foundations of the threshold shake and the building fills with smoke. We should probably connect this to the cloud of the Lord's presence, described in places like Exodus

chapter 40, but also to a glorious cloud of incense. As the building shakes, so does the prophet, Isaiah recognizing all too clearly his own sinfulness and his membership of a sinful people, exposed by the dazzling glory and holiness of the Lord's fiery presence, despairs, suddenly seeing who he is in relation to the holiness of the Lord and thinking himself to be a dead man.

As Oswald underlines, it is not the greatness of the Lord's might so much as the consuming holiness of his presence that impresses itself upon the prophet. As for his own sinful character and the sinful character of the people among whom he ministered, Isaiah feels the primary locus of that uncleanness to be in their lips and their speech. We might perhaps relate this to the teaching of the book of Proverbs and elsewhere, where the tongue is the chief organ revealing the character of a person.

We might think about the false worship of Judah also, as described in chapter 1, as a particularly egregious example of their unclean lips. James speaks of unclean lips in his epistle, in chapter 3 verses 10-12. From the same mouth comes blessing and cursing.

My brothers, these things ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water. One of the burning ones, the seraphim, takes a burning coal from the altar and touches the lips of Isaiah with it, cleansing his mouth for service.

We should also recognise that this is a sort of igniting of his tongue. On the day of Pentecost, for instance, the ascended Christ sends his spirit upon his disciples in the form of tongues of fire alighting upon them. The tongues of fire become flaming tongues of speech by which they bear a spirit-empowered witness to Christ.

Something similar is happening here. The burning one is making Isaiah another sort of burning one, a prophet who can speak with fiery words. The fiery presence of the Lord that had earlier terrified Isaiah does not destroy but cleanses him, purging him of his guilt and atoning for his sin.

Having had his unclean lips cleansed, Isaiah is now prepared for service. The next thing that we hear is the Lord's voice, presumably addressing the assembly of the divine council. Whom shall I send, presumably refers to the Lord himself, and who will go for us to the divine council that surrounds him, the seraphim and any of the other heavenly hosts who are present.

As in 1 Kings chapter 22, the prophet primarily seems to be a witness to these proceedings and is not directly summoned nor commanded. However, Isaiah speaks up, volunteering himself for the mission. We should think here also of the mission of the prophet.

A priest is someone who acts as a household servant for the Lord in his temple and also maintaining the household of his people. The king is the vice-guarant of the Lord, one who rules under him as his son. The prophet however is a direct participant in the heavenly council.

He participates in the deliberations of the divine council around the Lord in situations like this. He is one of the messengers of the Lord and the divine council to the people, but also represents the people to the council. Oswald helpfully articulates the progressive development of this scene.

The sequential relationship of the elements ought not to be overlooked. Each element leads to the next. The king's death prepares the way for the vision of God.

The vision of God leads to self-despair. Self-despair opens the door to cleansing. Cleansing makes it possible to recognize the possibility of service.

The total experience then leads to an offering of oneself. The Lord's commission to Isaiah is a strange one. The commission is to tell the people what the effect of his message will be.

The people would be rendered insensible, much as Pharaoh's heart was hardened at the time of the exodus. It is important as John Goldingay notes to recognize that Isaiah's commission was designed to be heard by Judah itself. In 1 Kings chapter 22, Ahab was informed that there was a lying spirit in the mouth of his prophets, yet he heeded them nonetheless.

It is not as if Judah is left without warning. Rather, the very warning message will compound and accelerate their judgment. Paradoxically, the warning message will itself be a means by which that of which it warns will be affected.

The people's senses would still physically function, but they would be robbed of spiritual perception in judgment for their sin. Sin gradually renders people unresponsive and insensible, hearts hardened, necks stiffened, ears dulled and eyes darkened. The response of the prophet is to ask a familiar question from the Psalms and elsewhere in scripture.

How long? This is a common question in lament. We see it in places like Psalm 13 verses 1-2. How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me? Psalm 74 verse 10.

How long, O God? Is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile your name forever? Psalm 89 verse 46. How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? The judgment, however, the Lord declares, would continue until the land was laid waste by it, desolated by the Lord's judgment. As we saw in the preceding

chapters, it will only be through the purgation of judgment and the cutting off of all the sinful and wicked of the land that the people will finally experience the promise that we see at the beginning of chapter 2, for instance.

This would involve both desolation, the city's laid waste without inhabitant, and also deportation, the Lord removing people far away. We could perhaps connect this to three different waves of judgment. The wave of judgment in the Syro-Ephraimite war in the next few years, the wave of judgment in the attack of the Assyrians that would lead to the near destruction of Jerusalem in 701 BC, and then later in the destruction of Judah by Babylon in 586 BC.

One might see the stump here as Jerusalem, which barely survived the attack of the Assyrians in 701 BC. One could also imagine it applying to Judah after the return from exile in Babylon in the 530s BC. As Joseph Blenkinsop notes, Holy Seed only elsewhere is mentioned in Ezra chapter 9 verse 2, in reference to the population of the returnees, some of whom had been intermarrying with surrounding pagan peoples.

There is a hint of promise at the end, after all of the judgment has fallen upon the people. They will not be destroyed, but purged. A small remnant will remain, but yet they will be a holy remnant.

Through them there is the hope of the people finally flourishing. A question to consider, how does the commission of Isaiah in this chapter provide a fundamental framework for understanding Jesus and the church's mission in the New Testament? Mark chapter 6 verses 30 to 56. And he began to teach them many things.

And when it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, This is a desolate place, and the hour is now late. Send them away to go into the surrounding countryside and villages, and buy themselves something to eat. And he answered them, You give them something to eat.

And they said to him, Shall we go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread and give it to them to eat? And he said to them, How many loaves do you have? Go and see. And when they had found out, they said, Five and two fish. Then he commanded them all to sit down in groups on the green grass.

So they sat down in groups by hundreds and by fifties. And taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven and said a blessing, and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples to set before the people. And he divided the two fish among them all.

And they all ate and were satisfied. And they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. And those who ate the loaves were five thousand men.

Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side,

to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went up on the mountain to pray. When evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land.

And he saw that they were making headway painfully, for the wind was against them. And about the fourth watch of the night he came to them walking on the sea. He meant to pass by them.

But when they saw him walking on the sea, they thought it was a ghost and cried out, for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid. And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased, and they were utterly astounded, for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret, and moored to the shore. And when they got out of the boat, the people immediately recognized him, and ran about the whole region, and began to bring the sick people on their beds, to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he came, in villages, cities, or countryside, they laid the sick in the market-places, and implored him that they might touch even the fringe of his garment.

And as many as touched it were made well. In the second half of Mark chapter 6, the apostles return from their mission with news of their success. With Jesus they go to a deserted location to rest for a while.

Like Jesus, they need time to refresh themselves and regain their strength. And once again, Jesus and his disciples are treating the wilderness as if it were a base of operations. This might be reminiscent of the story of David when pursued by King Saul, or of the story of Elijah the prophet.

The wilderness is the natural place to reform Israel. It's reminiscent of God's original formation of his people in the wilderness after he led them up out of Egypt. John the Baptist was the voice of one crying in the wilderness in chapter 1, and the frequency with which Jesus spends time in the wilderness recalls his message and location.

The sea crossings might also draw the mind of the hearer of this text back to Exodus and the Red Sea crossing. However, even though they tried to get away for some solitude, they are immediately recognized and the crowd follows after them. Jesus takes compassion upon the crowd as they are like sheep without a shepherd.

That expression, sheep without a shepherd, is one that is also used to describe Israel after a defeat in 1 Kings 22 verse 17. It's also used to describe the state of Israel under the wicked and neglectful leaders in Ezekiel chapter 34, and to describe the appointment of Joshua in Numbers chapter 27 verses 15 to 21. Moses spoke to the Lord saying, Let

the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the congregation who shall go out before them and come in before them, who shall lead them out and bring them in, that the congregation of the Lord may not be as sheep that have no shepherd.

So the Lord said to Moses, Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the spirit, and lay your hand on him. Make him stand before Eliezer the priest and all the congregation, and you shall commission him in their sight. You shall invest him with some of your authority, that all the congregation of the people of Israel may obey.

And he shall stand before Eliezer the priest, who shall inquire for him by the judgment of the Urim before the Lord. At his word they shall go out, and at his word they shall come in, both he and all the people of Israel with him, the whole congregation. And Ezekiel chapter 34 verses 11 to 15 provides an even more startling background.

Hearing all of these verses in the background gives Jesus' statement added texture. Jesus is recognising that Israel have been ravaged by their enemies, neglected and preyed upon by their leaders, and that they need a faithful, divinely appointed leader over them. Jesus is like his namesake Joshua, the one who will play the part of the shepherd for the neglected sheep, and will bring them into the promised pasture.

However, he has also, God himself, come to shepherd the abandoned flock. We might also hear hints of the Exodus in the background here. Moses was the shepherd who led the flock of Israel through the wilderness with his shepherd's rod.

Jesus also crosses the sea, leads the flock, and provides them with bread in the wilderness. Jesus challenges the disciples to give the crowd something to eat. However, the scale of that task is suggested by their response.

200 denarii would be about half a year's wages. Jesus instructs them to tally up what food they do have to hand, five loaves and two fish. The five loaves might recall the five loaves of 1 Samuel 21, which David received when he was fleeing from Saul from the priests at Nob.

Jesus then tells them to sit down in groups on the green grass. Why mention the green grass? Well, maybe because they're sheep. Jesus is the shepherd and he's providing good pasture land for a formerly shepherdless flock.

They sit down in groups of hundreds and fifties. That's an interesting detail, as is the fact that only the men are numbered. This suggests that they are like a military company.

Military companies could be divided into hundreds and fifties and that sort of group. In Exodus chapter 13 verse 18, Israel left Egypt and in Joshua chapter 1 verses 14, Israel entered Canaan in fifties. They were also numbered apart from women and children in places like Exodus chapter 12 verse 37.

Here they are being given bread in the wilderness as Israel was fed by the manna in Exodus chapter 16. In Exodus chapter 18, Israel is also divided into thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens under appointed leaders. And Jesus, by telling his disciples to do all of these things, seems to be highlighting their role as his ministers, acting on his behalf towards the flock of which he is the chief shepherd.

He blesses and breaks the loaves and divides the fish and the disciples distribute them. But it seems as if the miracle is taking place in their hands, not in his hands. We shouldn't miss the Eucharistic themes here.

Jesus treats the bread in much the same way as in the Last Supper. He takes it, he gives thanks or blesses it, he breaks it and he gives it. If we compare this account with Mark chapter 14 verses 17 to 23 and the description of the Last Supper there, further parallels can be seen, including the fact that it is in the evening, the eaters are reclining and that all partake.

All of this seems to offer a picture of the order of the church. You have Christ as the chief shepherd, you have the under shepherds of the apostles and they minister to people who are divided into different groups. John the Baptist is Elijah and in the previous account he has been described in a way that recalls the story of Elijah in his conflict with Ahab and Jezebel.

Jesus is the successor, he is like Elisha. Elisha performs a multiplication of loaves in 2 Kings chapter 4 verses 42 to 44. A man came from Baal Shalisha bringing the man of God bread of the first fruits, 20 loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack.

And Elisha said, Give to the men that they may eat. But his servant said, How can I set this before a hundred men? So he repeated, Give them to the men that they may eat. For thus says the Lord, They shall eat and have some left.

So he set it before them, and they ate and had some left according to the word of the Lord. Jesus then performs a similar miracle. The parallels really aren't difficult to hear, but on a much greater scale.

Not just feeding 100 people, feeding 5000 people. Performing an Elisha like miracle at this point may also cast the succession of Jesus from the Elijah like John in sharper relief. The story of the feeding of the 5000 is told in each of the four gospels and each gospel includes the detail of the 12 baskets of fragments gathered up afterwards is obviously very important.

Why 12? Perhaps it's an association with the fullness of Israel. Perhaps it's to make the point that each of the 12 has a basket a piece. In keeping with the ecclesiological themes, they are each equal partakers in the ministry of Christ.

We should also remember that the story comes after they have returned from their

mission. Mission to the last is followed by ministry to the flock. Immediately after this, Jesus dismisses the crowd and makes his disciples go before him to the other side in the boat while he goes up on the mountain alone to pray.

Perhaps we might think of Moses ascending Mount Sinai here, but if so I think it would only be a faint illusion. The boat, however, is caught in a storm as at the end of Mark chapter 4. Jesus comes to them around the time of the dawn walking on the sea and there's a peculiar detail mentioned at the end of verse 48. He meant to pass them by.

They, seeing him, are terrified thinking that he is a ghost, at which point Jesus assures them, gets in the boat with them and the wind ceases. Once again I think that there are anticipations of his later resurrection here, not least in the uncertainty about whether they are seeing a ghost, although I think there's more going on here. A number of scholars have connected the walking on the water with the Exodus and the Red Sea Crossing and have pointed to verses such as Isaiah chapter 43 verse 16 or chapter 51 verses 9 to 10 and Psalm 77 verse 19.

However Richard Hayes suggests another background. In Job chapter 9 verse 8 in the Septuagint translation, God is described as the one who walks upon the sea as upon dry ground. If this is the primary connection, it may also help us to understand the reference to Jesus' intention to pass them by because just a few verses later in Job chapter 9 verse 11 we read, In Job 9, God's walking upon the sea is associated with the mystery of God's ways and the way that he passes by without our truly perceiving him.

Mark may be telling his account in a way that helps the hearer of his passage recall these verses from Job. The reference to passing by might also bring to mind Exodus chapter 33 verses 17 to 23 and Exodus chapter 34 verse 6 where God reveals his glory to Moses passing before him while shielding him from the sight. Passing by is repeatedly referred to in this passage, connecting the notion with the revelation of God's glory.

When Jesus speaks to his disciples then, he tells them, It is I could also be translated I am, a reference to the name of God and that expression do not be afraid is commonly found when God appears to his people. The event of walking on the sea then is, for Mark, a sort of divine epiphany in which the identity of Jesus is being revealed but although the disciples are astounded they have insensitive hearts and they don't truly understand. We are told that this is related to their failure to understand the loaves.

What is that connection? Perhaps the connection is that their fear arises from an inability to appreciate the manner of Jesus' presence with and empowering of them. He has equipped them to cast out demons. He has enabled them to multiply the loaves and his spirit and his presence is also with them in the boat facing the wind.

A question to consider. Reading the story of the feeding of the five thousand and of Jesus walking on the water, how can we better understand ourselves as the church in light of

them?