

God in a Sack

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Isaiah 6:1-8

This morning I want to begin by connecting some dots. The first dot I want to connect is Uzziah. Nobody names their kid Uzziah anymore. It's probably been two thousand years or more since people stopped naming their kid Uzziah. But there was a time when a lot of people probably named their sons Uzziah – because Uzziah was the beloved king of Judah – the southern kingdom of Israel who reigned for nearly fifty years. He led the people well and in the pantheon of Israel's leaders was probably third only to Solomon and David. But Uzziah was struck with leprosy during his reign and was removed from the throne. Back then they thought getting leprosy meant you were cursed by God. He died in approximately 742 BC. Dot one.

Dot two: In the year King Uzziah died – a young man Isaiah –whom no one was naming their kids after – stepped into Solomon's great temple and saw a vision – he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up and the hem of his robe filled the temple and smoked filled the temple and six winged seraphs hovered above the throne and the ground shook. And they sang – Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory. And all of a sudden the young man Isaiah – enveloped in the glory of God could see himself for how small and insignificant and unclean he simply was and that he was no better than anyone else. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. And out of this profound confession Isaiah is touched by the tongs of grace and his is forgiven and when he hears the call of God – he answers, Here am I, send me. Dot two.

Dot three: this humbled and graced man Isaiah becomes a poet. A poet and a prophet. And he starts to say and write words that 2700 years later we are still reciting.

- The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in the land of deep

darkness on them has light shined. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government will be upon his shoulder and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

- Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and cry to her that her warfare is ended.
- Those who wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.
- The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

All from the young man whose name back then nobody could bring to mind. Dot three.

Dot four: On Bethlehem's plain a child is born, a son is given. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. And the great light – this Jesus of Nazareth – begins his ministry. And he begins his ministry by asking for the scroll of Isaiah – and he turns to the 60th chapter and he declares what his ministry is about: The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Jesus takes the words of Isaiah and with them casts his vision for what the reign of God is going to look like: good news to the oppressed, binding for brokenhearted, liberty for the captives, release for the prisoners and the proclamation that of the jubilee of God.

Dot one – Uzziah the beloved and leprous king. Dot two: in the year King Uzziah dies, Isaiah sees the Lord high and lifted up and is called out of his own lostness. Dot three: From this man of once unclean lips come words that nobody can seem to forget. Dot four: the Messiah takes those words and with them casts his vision. A vision no smaller than the vision Isaiah saw long ago – good news to the oppressed,

binding for the broken hearted, liberty for the captives, release for the prisoners.

And do you know what the people did when they heard Jesus claim Isaiah's vision – good news to the oppressed, binding for the broken hearted, liberty for the captives, release for the prisoners? They took him out to the edge of town and tried to throw him off a cliff.

Because you know when you come face to face with a vision like that – when you see the Lord high and lifted – when you hear the Lord say that the poor and oppressed and brokenhearted and captives – are themselves to be high and lifted up – it is a vision that either brings you to your knees – or else causes you to throw its composer off the cliff.

So I want to wonder with you this morning about what your vision of God is. The election is over – one King's reign is soon to be over and another King's reign is soon to begin – in the year that Obama finished and Trump began – what is your vision of God? Because you know in this grand sweep of God's story – it seems that God has so little interest in who we put on our throne. So little interest. Instead God is interested in what you see on his throne. What is your vision of God?

It makes me think of a poem by Wilbur Rees:

“I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please; not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but just enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don't want enough of God to make me love someone who is different from me or to give too much of myself away. I want ecstasy, not

transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$3 worth of God please.”

How much of God do you want?

Twenty nine years ago this past week I watched my one and only child enter the world. It was one of the most intense experiences I've ever experienced. Every single bit of it. All the wonder without any of the pain. How great is that? I remember driving Amanda to the hospital at 1:00 in the morning and saying to myself – everything changes today. And it did. And it was miraculous and scary and wonderful and emotional and happy and bloody – and I had no idea what it was going to do – what she was going to do – to change me. And there is this rush and you fall back upon yourself and say – Whoa. And you say whoa because something transcendent has taken place and you were swept into it, immersed into it, overwhelmed by it. And you are so sure this is a God thing because you can't hold it. You can't put it into a paper sack. You can't put a number on it. You can't load it into your iPhone.

How much of God do you want?

I don't know about you but when I think about how much of God I want I usually only want as much of God as I think I can manage. That's how we do life, right? We do life by what we think we can manage. We manage our time, we manage our schedules, we manage our homes, we manage our employees, we manage our money, we manage our careers, we manage people and we manage events. Life is something to be managed. And so when it comes to

“You may not see God high up on his throne – but I can guarantee you, you will see God in the mystery of the person sitting next to you.”

God, isn't it often the case that we want as much of God as we are able to manage? As much as we can manage into our schedules, into our routines, into our bank accounts, into our calendars or into our prayer time. We want as much of God as we can manage.

Maybe we did that with this past election. It doesn't matter who you voted for but was there the chance that you tried to get your God to somehow conform to the choice you made—or to justify it. I know I did.

Imagine with me an unmanageable God! Imagine with me a God who will not conform to your schedule. Imagine with me a God who may not agree with your definition of success. Imagine with me a God who may have a whole different idea for your life than the one you presently have for yourself. Imagine with me a God who is presently preparing to dislodge from you a dearly held conviction. Imagine with me a God who may not want to be a member of your political party. Imagine with me a God who is trying to tell you that you have it all wrong. Imagine with me a God who is so holy, so majestic, so perfect, so terrible in splendor that if we were to even peek at him we would spontaneously combust. Imagine with me a God that none of us can quite fit into our little minds and hearts. Imagine with me an unmanageable God.

I love what Annie Dillard had to say about how blithely we approach and invoke the power of God. She says, "It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Jonathan Edwards, the great 18th century American preacher, wrote that the times he felt closest to God were when thunderstorms would appear on horizon. At the first hint of the darkness, Edwards would make for the fields and watch as the sky grew black and the wind picked up, thunder rumbled and lightning flashed across the sky. The fiercer the storm the better. And he would tell of how as the wind blew and the thunder crashed and the lightning pealed he would sing and chant his meditations.

Our Session and staff have been reading *The Chronicles of Narnia* and I was reminded of Lucy in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when she comes into contact with the newly resurrected Aslan, this transcendent and holy lion. And the lion invites her and the children to romp a while and Lucy describes it like playing with a kitten as much as with a thunderstorm.

Playing with a thunderstorm. I saw the Lord sitting on a throne high and lifted up and the hem of his robe filled the temple. The spirit of the Lord is upon me to proclaim good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to release the captives.

"There is a longing," said Father Gregory Boyle, "in all of us to be God-enthralled. So enthralled that to those hunkered down in their disgrace, in the shadow of death, we become transparent messengers of God's own tender mercy. We want to be seized by that same tenderness; we want to bear the largeness of God."

So it's no surprise when the disciples out for a day fishing and Jesus tells them to put out into the deep. Put out into the deep and cast their nets. Cast their nets into the deep. Into the unmanageable invisible mysterious depths. And they cast their nets into this deep region and they pull out an unmanageable amount of fish. An unmanageable amount of fish. And Peter says, Whoa!!! Woe is me for I am a sinner. I am just a regular bloke and I have been in the presence of the transcendent. And Jesus says, from now on your life is going to be about catching people.

Peter casts his net into the deep and pulls up an unmanageable amount of fish and Peter goes, Whoa. And then Jesus says – now it's time to cast your life into people. Now it's time to bind up the brokenhearted, the release the captive, to bring good news to the poor – and Peter goes Whoa. You know Lord I would have been happy with the \$3 sack. A few minnows would have done the trick. Just a little bit of the divine. Not enough to make me care about people different from me. But now it's Whoa. Now you want my net full of people.

And that's really where we meet the unmanageable God the most – in his unmanageable people. In the sacred mystery of other people. In the brokenhearted,

the oppressed, the captive. You may not see God high up on his throne – but I can guarantee you, you will see God in the mystery of the person sitting next to you. In the depths of the person living next door. In the confounding behavior of someone different than you. In the messy lives of those you do not understand. In the unclean lips that match your unclean lips. You will see visions of God there that you never dreamt you'd see. Good news to the oppressed. Binding for the brokenhearted. Release to the captive.

Mother Teresa said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

And there is nothing more true than that – we belong to each other. Americans. Democrats. Republicans. Rich. Poor. Black. White. Syria. Sudanese. Old. Young. Gay. Straight. Losers. Winners. If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

"I would like to buy \$3 worth of God, please;

Would that it never be so. For in the year King Uzziah died – I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the hem of his robe filled the temple. And I heard him say, "Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me! Let me throw my net into the mysterious depth of the human sea. Let me tell the good news for the poor. Binding for the brokenhearted. Release for the captive. Lest I forget that it is to these I belong.



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Church of the Palms

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