

May 26, 2024
Holy Trinity
Isaiah 6:1-8
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
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The Year that King Uzziah Died

It was the year the King Uzziah died. I've preached a sermon about it before, about the year that King Uzziah died, because I think that it's such a revealing way to start a story. It tells us more than when something happened. It tells us about the state of mind of the people that it happened to. It tells us that that they were living in uncertain times, in a time of change.

It was the year that King Uzziah died. King Uzziah, whose story is told in 2 Chronicles, chapter 26. If you've read about him, you still might not remember. King Uzziah, one king in a long list of kings, whose lives and reigns are summed up, generally not getting much more than a chapter in books of the Bible that we rarely read from in worship, that might easily be overlooked.

But to me, the fact that it was the year that King Uzziah died matters. Because that means that it was a time of transition, a time of uncertainty, an unpredictable time. What was going to happen next, as the kingdom of Judah shifted from one reign to another, from one king to another? Uzziah had been king for 52 years, which means that most of the people in Judah had never known any other king. So, when he died, it would have been a significant shake up to the people's sense of stability; their understanding of themselves, their understanding of the security of the nation.

How many of you watched the funeral of Queen Elizabeth on television? It might not have been appointment television in this country, but still, many in the United States tuned in. Why? She wasn't our queen. We don't have a monarchy. But still many Americans were part of the estimated four billion people world-wide, who tuned in to watch Queen Elizabeth's funeral on television, myself and my

family included. Was it because of the sense of history; the death of Britain's longest reigning monarch, and the second longest reigning monarch in the history of the world, the end of an era? The British monarchy represents a kind of historical continuity and with her long reign, Queen Elizabeth embodied that continuity, that sense of permanence.

Not being subjects of a monarch, I'm sure we can't fully understand the sense of national displacement that might have been felt by many in the United Kingdom after the death of Queen Elizabeth. But surely, we can understand the sense of shifting ground that comes with the end of a reign that spanned so many years and was a fixture on the global social and political stage. Other world leaders, figureheads and policymakers, have come and gone but Queen Elizabeth had always been there.

And that's for us, who are not subjects of a monarch, for whom the death of a queen is more of a historical curiosity than something that actually affects our day-to-day life. Her death still felt a shaking up of the world order. But, even in the UK, the death of their queen, significant in terms of national identity that it might be, did not change the regular running of the country that in reality is done by a democratically elected parliamentary government. Still the death of Queen Elizabeth and the global reaction to it might help us to skim the surface of what it must have felt like, for the people of Judah, in the year that King Uzziah died, but never completely. Never truly.

Because for the people of Judah, the nature and character of their king really did affect their day-to-day life, how they practiced their religion, even what religion they practiced, as some kings turned them away from the worship of the God of the ancestors to the worship of idols, what wars they entered into and how successful they were in those wars, how they were taxed, basically, whether they were in the hands of an oppressor or in the hands of a king who functioned as a shepherd of the people. And they had no say in it at all. And honestly, the historical

record for the kings of Judah had not been good. There had been far more bad kings than good kings.

For the most part, in the year that King Uzziah died, they were mourning one of the few good ones, one of the few good kings. For the most part, King Uzziah had been a good king. According to his story, told in 2 Chronicles, Uzziah was a king who sought God. In the eyes of his people, his reign was blessed.

He was successful in warfare against the Philistines. The Ammonites paid him tribute. He built towers in Jerusalem and strengthened its defenses. Judah had a large and powerful standing army under his reign. The land was prosperous while he was king. He himself had large herds and fertile vineyards and he loved the soil. He was more than just a military leader. He cared about the land, he was a farmer, a nurturer of the very earth that he had been given to rule.

But there was a flaw in his story. We learn in 2 Chronicles 26 that, “when Uzziah had become strong, he became proud, to his destruction.” (2 Chronicles 26:16)

Apparently, King Uzziah decided that he was going to take over the role of the priests in the Temple and make offerings that he had had not been instructed or consecrated by God to make. He entered the Temple to usurp the role of the priests making an offering at the altar of the incense, and when the priests tried to send him out of the Temple, Uzziah did not accept their instruction and became angry at the priests. He was insistent about having his own way, an absolute monarch, who believed he should rule in all things, military, political, and religious, but that was not what God wanted from him or for him. And when he refused to listen to the priests, when he reacted in anger, he became leprous. He was unclean and had to be removed from the Temple, for the rest of his life he suffered from leprosy and could not enter the Temple. He had to be secluded, away from the palace, living in isolation in another house, and his son, Jotham had to govern in his place.

For the last 11 years of King Uzziah's life, this great and powerful and respected king, he had lived in isolation, no longer able to carry out his duties as king, and then it was the year that King Uzziah died.

One has to wonder, how did his country remember him, how did they celebrate his reign, this king who had done great things for them, but who had also decided that he knew better than God, that he should do it all, that he should replace the divine order of things?

So, there they were, in the year that King Uzziah died, in this shaky place, this transitional place, waiting to see what Jotham would do, now that he was king in his own right, not just regent, not just acting in the place of his father, but fully king, able to shape the nation in the way that he wanted. What would happen?

And in this time of national change, this time when the nation was in mourning and nobody really knew what to expect or what would happen next, Isaiah was a priest in the Temple.

In a time when being a priest was largely a family thing, passed down in the line of Aaron from generation to generation, we don't know if Isaiah was truly invested in his calling to be a priest or not, if he felt his faith at his core, or if it was just his job, because it had been his father's job and his grandfather's and great-grandfather's job. Light the candles, say the prayers, make the sacrifices, repeat, day after day, week after week, year after year. But he, like all of the people of Judah, must have been feeling the shake-up, of the death of the king. After all, king Uzziah had tried to take over the priestly role. Who knew what might happen with this new king?

And did Isaiah and the other priests know that they God they served, the God that they sacrificed to, the God that it was their job to worship, did they know that God was real, that God was present, that God knew them, watched over them, heard their prayers?

In the year the King Uzziah died, Isaiah saw the truth, saw a vision of heaven and experienced the truth and reality of God, the Holy, Holy, Holy God, whose presence shook the Temple, whose presence filled the Temple, whose servants the seraphs, the heavenly hosts, sang the songs of glory.

And I wonder if, before that if Isaiah had ever really understood, had ever really believed in the God in whose Temple he served.

Because when Isaiah actually had an encounter with that God, what he said was “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.” (Isaiah 6:5a)

It seems that Isaiah knew that he wasn't worthy to be in the presence of God. Who knew what words those unclean lips had spoken? What questions those unclean lips had asked? What blasphemies those unclean lips had uttered, as he had gone through the motions of Temple worship?

But into that moment of transition, into that moment of fear, and change and confusion, into the year that King Uzziah died, God came and God called, and God was revealed as the holy and glorious constant in the world, in the universe. Revealed as the God who calls and cleanses and who invites and chooses, who reigns, over all things, over all kings, over all nations, over all earthly authorities. God reigns.

It was the year that King Uzziah died, and in that moment of fear, confusion, transition, change, Isaiah saw God. He saw God's glory; he was in the presence of God's holiness. And he was sent to people who lived in the midst of fear and political uncertainty. To call them to holiness, to justice, to mercy, to faithfulness, to worship and to trust in the Holy, Holy, Holy God.

The God, who had been there all along, was revealed to Isaiah and to the people of Judah, in the year that King Uzziah died.

And to us, in our own times of change, in our own times of transition, in our own times of uncertainty, in these times when we too are wondering what might

happen next, the holy, holy, holy God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit comes. Comes and shakes our temples. Comes and gives us visions of holiness. Comes and sends us into the world, with words of hope and promise. For no matter what changes come into the world, our God, our Holy, Holy, Holy, God reigns. Amen.