

Trial by Fire. Isaiah 6:1-8

One of my favorite sayings: "*God doesn't want your capability. God only wants your availability.* If you'll give God your availability, God will provide the capability." Availability is when you make yourself accessible for use. Availability is what we see in Isaiah 6:8 -- "*I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I; send me.'*"

Mother's Day is normally a day of joy. For Toby Hawkins, Mother's Day several years ago was a day of despair. His son Brennan had been missing for two days. Brennan had gone to a Boy Scout camp in the mountains of Utah. Somewhere between the camp's artificial climbing wall and the chow hall, Brennan got separated from his group. Three thousand volunteers had been searching for Brennan but could find no trace of the boy. By the fourth day, things looked hopeless. An 11-year-old without food or shelter could not last much longer.

A man named Forrest Nunley heard about Brennan's predicament on the news. The 43-year-old house painter from Salt Lake City took time off from work and drove nearly two hours to the search area. But instead of looking in the area near the camp, where the search had been focused over the last four days, Forrest took his ATV about five miles away from the camp. By midday, he found Brennan. Nunley said, "*I turned a corner, and there was a kid standing in the middle of the trail. He was all muddy and wet from walking over wet ground.*" After picking up the young man, Nunley pulled out his cell phone - relieved to get a signal - and called 911 to report his find. Brennan Hawkins was saved because Forrest Nunley made himself available for the search.

Isaiah's vision is enthralling because it is honest. In the presence of the Glory of God, it is not difficult to imagine how unholy one might feel. Although the phraseology is uncommon we may still relate to the prophet's exclamation: "*I am a person of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips . . . !*" (v. 5). When presented with purity, holiness, grace and

light, we easily see each unkind and coarse word we have ever spoken.

“*Unclean lips*” is a haunting phrase that covers a broad range of behaviors. Jesus challenges the religious leaders with the idea that it isn’t what goes into a person that causes the person to be unclean; rather, it is what comes out that tarnishes. Lies, gossip, unkindness, prejudice and putdowns all qualify. Making commitments you never honor, telling someone what we believe they to want to hear, naming and shaming also apply.

In large and small ways, we are people of ‘unclean lips’ as well as unclean thoughts. But, the Biblical antidote appears to be somewhat excessive: burning away guilt, dirt and shame along with healthy flesh and blood.

Is it possible to be people of clean lips, sinless, guiltless, shameless, redeemed and renewed, without this trial by fire? On our own we can do nothing; and the sooner we learn and adopt this truth, the quicker the free and loving grace of God will make everything brand new.

We are not evil, mean, or hateful people; but simply humans standing in the desperate need of God’s love, forgiveness, second, and third chances, ad infinitum. None of us deserve God’s grace; but none of us is denied it either. This gift cleanses and changes and continually creates us as the people God longs for us to be.

A homeless woman walked into a Chicago church on Sunday morning. She was without options and with nothing to lose, decided to ‘try God.’ She sat in the back row by herself. She listened but understood little. Panic set in as the pastor began speaking about Holy Communion. As he shared the invitation and the Great Thanksgiving, she decided it wasn’t for her, she was unworthy. She was fond of the idea, but deep down she knew she was an unclean person, and didn’t deserve Holy Communion.

She was alarmed as a woman walked toward her holding bread and a cup. She started to shake and moved her head from side to side. “*What’s the matter?*” the woman asked. “*I’ve never been here before. I don’t belong*”

here. I don't know what's happening," the young woman stammered. "You don't have to belong here. Holy Communion is for everyone."

"Not for me," the visitor replied. *"I'm not a good person. That's not for me,"* she said, pointing at the bread and cup. *"This is especially for you,"* the woman said. *"No one here deserves it. It is a gift to us from God. You don't have to get ready for Communion; Communion makes you ready to feel God's love."*

The homeless woman sat quietly weeping, speechless. She took Holy Communion. The young woman broke down, sobbing, *"Thank you, thank you,"* over and over. This is what it means to be a person of unclean lips.

This story isn't over yet. The following Sunday the young woman returned to worship with five of her friends. She found the lady who had served her Holy Communion and asked her, *"When is Holy Communion?"*

"Well, Holy Communion is served only on the first Sunday of each month," the lady replied. Wide-eyed, the young woman said, *"But we need it. I haven't felt anything so good in years, and I want my friends to feel it, too!"*

Holy Communion is not an opulent gift, rarely given. We need this gift because it makes us *"One with Christ and one with each other."* We are renewed and redeemed for a larger purpose than personal comfort and delight. We are transformed in the same manner as the prophet Isaiah, when he heard God ask, *"Whom shall I send?"* His obedience must be our obedience: *"Here am I, send me!"* (v. 8).

Love, acceptance, healing, and forgiveness are necessary for people of unclean lips, who live among people who are the same. We love, obey and serve a God who will not deny this Spiritual quartet to us, and to everyone we share it with. Our lives offer nothing of value if we spend them judging who is of worth and who is not. None of us is deserving but all of us are deemed worthy by God. Let each of us so live. Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen