



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

August 18, 2013

"Who Will Go For Us?" — Isaiah 6:1-8

The Rev. Dr. Tim Shaw

Ernest Shackleton is one of my heroes. At the beginning of the 20th century during what has been called, "The Heroic Age of Exploration", Ernest Shackleton set out to be the first person to successfully cross the continent of Antarctica. That's a trip of more than 2,000 miles on the bottom of the earth. And in truly spectacular fashion, Shackleton failed in his attempt to do that. The story of his colossal failure is a story of failure turned into triumph.

Because of Shackleton's extraordinary leadership 27 men survived nearly two years stranded in Antarctica after their ship, the *Endurance*, was first trapped in sea ice and then crushed by the ice in the Weddell Sea. Right in front of their eyes, Shackleton and his crew watched the ship that had become their home be completely destroyed. They were now stranded 1,200 miles from civilization. They had no means of communication and no hope of rescue.

After being trapped on the ice for months the ice flows began to break up as spring and summer approached. Once there were large enough breaks in the ice, they launched three lifeboats they had salvaged from the *Endurance* and started rowing for Elephant Island. Eventually, they reached that uninhabited rock. That was

the first solid ground their feet had touched for more than a year.

They made camp, but quickly realized that no one would look for them on Elephant Island. So Shackleton made the crazy decision to take one of the lifeboats and turn it into a sailboat. Shackleton and five other men got into that boat, which was 22 feet long and six feet wide at its broadest point, and they set off on an 800-mile journey across some of the stormiest waters on the planet.

I promise you that I'm not making this up! The story is actually more amazing than what I'm telling you. Seventeen days later, Shackleton and his crew landed back on South Georgia Island. South Georgia was the site of a small whaling station. They had left from that whaling station two years before. The big problem was that after that 800-mile journey, they landed on the wrong side of the island. They now needed to hike 30 miles across a snow-covered island that had a 4,000-foot high ridge in the middle of it, to make it to the whaling station. No one had ever done this hike before. So Shackleton and three of his men started climbing their way across South Georgia Island.

Listen to Alfred Lansing tell what happened towards the end of their traverse across South

Georgia: "They moved as quickly as they could, but there was very little speed left in them. Their legs were wobbly and strangely disobedient. Finally, well after four o'clock, they struggled to the top. The ridge was so sharp that Shackleton was able to sit astride it, one leg on either side (which is kind of like a frozen version of the Ko'olau Mountains). The light was fading fast, but peering warily down he saw that though the descent was steep, it was not so bad as the others had been. Toward the bottom it appeared to slope away toward level ground. But there was no telling for sure because the valley now was thick with fog and the light was very poor. Furthermore, the fog creeping up behind them was approaching very rapidly, threatening to obliterate everything, leaving them blinded and trapped atop this razorback."

Here they were, trapped on a frozen mountainside. The light was fading. The temperature was dropping. Down below them was a fog bank that prevented Shackleton and his men from seeing what was below. Shackleton sat down with his men and simply asked them this question, "Can we stay here?"

That's a question worth asking ourselves when we're facing tremendous challenges filled with uncertainty. "Can we stay here?"

The answer to that question was simple. If they stayed there they'd be dead. So Shackleton came up with a plan. They would sit one behind the other, they'd wrap their legs around each other and they would slide down the face of the mountain. His two climbing companions were stunned. They thought Shackleton had lost his mind! But Shackleton was not joking. He wasn't even smiling. They knew he meant it.

One of them asked, "What if we hit a rock?" Shackleton responded, "Can we stay here?" The other guy asked, "What if the slope didn't level off? What if there was another precipice hidden in the clouds below?" Shackleton simply responded, "Can we stay here?"

There was no other way down. They had to slide into the unknown. Listen to Alfred Lansing, "They looked like three tobogganers without a toboggan. Altogether it took a little more than a minute, and Shackleton did not permit any time for reflection. When they were ready, he kicked off. In the next instant their hearts stopped beating. They seemed to hang poised for a split second, then suddenly the wind was shrieking in their ears, and a white blur of snow tore past.

Down...down...They screamed-not in terror necessarily, but simply because they couldn't help it. It was squeezed out of them by the rapidly mounting pressure in their ears and against their chests. Faster and faster-down...down...down!

"Then they shot forward onto the level, and their speed began to slacken. A moment later they came

to an abrupt halt in a snow bank. The three men picked themselves up. They were breathless and their hearts were beating wildly, but they found themselves laughing uncontrollably. What had been a terrifying prospect possibly a hundred seconds before had turned into a breathtaking triumph."

Shackleton and his climbing partners reached the whaling station and eventually were able to rescue all the men back on Elephant Island. Not a single person was lost.

That's a story of great courage. The story of Isaiah is also a story of great courage. As I said in my candidating sermon way back in April, one of the most important decisions you and I make in our lives—and we face this decision sometimes on an hour-by-hour, minute-by-minute basis—has to do with whether our lives are going to be fundamentally about a quest for safety or will we choose a life of courage. Do we want to be safe or do we want to be brave?

It's true that when we entrust our lives to Jesus Christ there's a safety and deep protection that Christ gives us. We are filled up and surrounded by God himself who has a love for us that envelops our lives and that love does not change. Ever. But one of the ways God shows His love for us is to help us decide whether we're going to live a life of courage...or a life of safety. Isaiah is invited to live a life of courage and he is able to live that kind of life because of what he experiences in the presence of God in the Temple.

Let me tell you a little bit about Isaiah and the kingdom of

Judah at the time of Isaiah's encounter with God.

Isaiah 6, verse 1. *"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple."*

The southern kingdom of Judah had grown in wealth and power during the reign of King Uzziah. He reigned for more than 50 years. The glory and power of Judah was almost as great as it was during the reign of Solomon. But the people became smug and self-satisfied in their wealth and power. They trusted King Uzziah to protect them and he did. Other nations around Judah were on the rise and they posed a threat to the people of Judah. The people had an impending sense of doom. And just at that moment, King Uzziah died and the people's sense of vulnerability only grew.

Isaiah was a prophet. He was a preacher who made his living, as guys like I do, with our mouths. He was most likely a member of the royal family. It seems that Isaiah's dad was a man by the name of Amoz. Amoz's brother was the father of King Uzziah, so Isaiah was part of the ruling elite. He probably went to the best schools. He was probably one of the wealthier people in the country. He was a successful prophet.

Isaiah had everything going for him but God was about to interrupt his life. God had something very important for Isaiah to do. To do what God calls Isaiah to do would require more courage than Isaiah had ever known. God was going to send him to the people of Judah and have him preach a message to them that God already knew they would reject.

In the eyes of the people, Isaiah would be despised because he told them something they did not want to hear. Isaiah's message would be a message of judgment because it would only be through judgment that hope would be born eventually in the people of Israel.

Isaiah experiences that same process of judgment and hope in his encounter with God in the Temple.

Isaiah chapter 6, verses 2-4. ²"Seraphs were in attendance above (God); each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. ³ And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." ⁴ The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke."

One of the reasons Isaiah was astounded was because what happened to him in the Temple was completely unexpected. He went to the Temple but didn't expect to encounter the true and living God. Christianity is not just about rules, regulations and beliefs. It's not just about knowing about God but knowing God. Isaiah saw God and it shocked him. He had a personal experience with the living God and that encounter rocked his life. He had a vision of the glory and absolute goodness of God. Verse 1 says that the hem of God's garment filled the Temple. Can you imagine how big this vision of God was if just the hem of God's garment completely filled the Temple?

Isaiah was a man who was used to walking in the corridors of power. He needed this kind of encounter with God. God does not

always show up in the lives of people like this but God showed up that day in his power and glory. Isaiah needed to be humbled. The angelic beings call out to one another, "Holy, holy, holy." To repeat the word 'holy' three times is to affirm the utter goodness and otherness and perfection of God. God is fully righteous and pure.

Isaiah 6, verse 5. *"And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"*

In the presence of God, Isaiah becomes deeply aware of how great his need for God's mercy actually is. He realizes that even in the area of his life in which he took the greatest pride, even in the area of his life that had been dedicated to the service of God, his role as a prophet, he was in need of God's forgiveness. Isaiah was a preacher, a prophet. He was a man who used his lips. He was probably proud of his work as a prophet. But in the presence of God he realized that even his motives behind his teaching were polluted.

If you've ever met the real God you will have a similar response to meeting God that Isaiah has. Isaiah pronounces a curse against himself. He's completely undone. He realizes he deserves judgment. If we're not deeply convicted by our sin, we will never get to the point of receiving the freedom of God's love. There is no way to get to peace with God without knowing this kind of unsettling experience with God because it is here that we come to the end of ourselves and cry out to God for mercy and grace, which God is eager to give us.

You and I need to know how great the debt we have with God actually is. We need to know how big the debt is to know what our response should be. If your friend pays for your coffee, that's not the same thing as having your friend pay your \$1,000,000 tax obligation. God has done something like that for you and me in the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus Christ.

Isaiah 6, verses 6-7. ⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. ⁷ The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out."

When Isaiah acknowledged his need to God, the need that God already saw in Isaiah, it was then that he cauterized the brokenness in Isaiah's life. He forgave him when Isaiah confessed his sin.

Isaiah 6:8: *"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, (now here come's God's question for us), "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"*

We'll never understand Isaiah's response in verse 8 unless we understand what happened to Isaiah in verses 1-7. Because Isaiah first came face to face with his enormous need for God's forgiveness it was only then that he was ready to experience the incredible grace of God. Because he has personally experienced the unmerited love of God, because he knows he's received something he did not deserve, Isaiah is ready to do whatever God wants him to do, even if everyone will reject him for speaking this hard word to the people.

Who will go for us?" "Here am I. Send me!"

It's when we admit our weakness; it's when we admit our sin and how great our need really is; it's when we realize how truly powerless we are, that we begin to become secure in Christ's love and begin to live lives of courage for the sake of others.

When I look at the needs of our world, when I consider the state of our nation, I know that God is calling you and me to do courageous things for the sake of His Kingdom. Our motivation is not a sense of desperation as it was in the case of Ernest Shackleton and his friends... although it is helpful to realize that we cannot just sit here and do nothing. Our motivation comes from what has been done for us in Jesus Christ.

Isaiah doesn't have a clear picture of who has paid for his sin. He doesn't yet know that God's judgment will come down on His own Son so that God's judgment might not come down on us. Isaiah walked out of the Temple that day a free man because God's judgment came down on Jesus Christ, centuries later.

"Here I am, send me! I don't care what's out there!"

Have you ever had a, "Woe is me!" experience? Have you experienced God's complete forgiveness? One of the goals of this church is to help you and me every week until we experience what Isaiah experienced so that each one of us will, like Isaiah say, "Here I am, send me!"