

A LIFE-CHANGING ENCOUNTER WITH GOD
Isaiah 6:1-8

What do you do when you stand in the presence of greatness?

When I was about 11 years old, I became very interested in NASCAR racing. Now, in order to be a real fan, I needed to have a favorite driver. My dad was a Richard Petty fan, so I became a Richard Petty fan. You need to know I was hardcore when it came to being a Petty fan. In those days, most of the races were not on television. So you had to listen to them on the radio. If Richard had trouble in a race and went out of the race, I would turn my radio off. Why? I didn't care anymore about the outcome.

So Richard Petty was my childhood sports hero. He was and I guess still is known as the King of Stock Car Racing. My dad decided that he would take our family down to Petty Enterprises in Level Cross, N.C., where they built and worked on the racecars Richard drove.

So we loaded into our old Plymouth, another family went with us, and we made our way to Level Cross. There was no reason to think Richard would be there, but the conversation among us, especially the kids, centered on what we wanted to say to him if we got to see him.

We arrived at the shops and were welcomed and invited to look around all we wanted. Certain areas were off limits, but for the most part we could see about everything. The lady who welcomed us told my dad she was pretty sure Richard would be coming by the office at some point that morning because he was taking his family on a short vacation that week to the beach, and today was pay day. He would probably come by and get his check.

It wasn't too long until a van drove into the parking lot. In that van was Richard Petty and his whole family. He got out and met with us, and he was so nice. He spent several minutes standing in the parking lot visiting with our family. Here was the moment I had dreamed of. I was standing beside Richard Petty. I looked up at him. I can remember to this very day what I said to him. I looked up at him and said...I didn't say anything. Not a word. I was in complete awe of king Richard.

The moment we had discussed in the car had arrived. I was standing beside Richard Petty in person. I was going to get to say to him all the things I had prepared to say.

My dad introduced our family to him. I shook his hand and I looked up at him. Richard is a tall guy. And I will never forget what this then 11-year-old boy said to Richard Petty, King of NASCAR.

In fact, I can show you exactly what happened. I stood there beside him, looked up at him and never said a word. My mouth sort of hung open, but I never said a word. As an 11-year-old kid in the presence of the king of NASCAR, I was in complete awe and left speechless.

While we can laugh at such an experience for me as an 11-year-old kid, there is another King before which we shall all stand one day. And this King is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is King Jesus!

I have every reason to believe that my reaction at that moment might be somewhat similar to the one when I was 11 years old.

I don't know that I will be able to say a word for at least awhile. To be in the presence of God, King Jesus, what an awesome moment that will be! We're in His presence now. He is here. This is an awesome moment, too. I am praying that in these days together and especially in these next few minutes that each of us will have a life-changing encounter with God.

Our theme for this meeting is E³: Encounter God, Engage Culture, Experience Peace.

Brothers and sisters, the truth is that we will not experience peace and we will not effectively engage the culture until we have first encountered God in a powerful, life-changing way.

I am not talking about a salvation encounter today necessarily, I am talking about a sanctifying encounter. I am assuming that most everyone in this crowd is already saved, but if there be someone on whose heart Jesus knocks in these few minutes, we will rejoice and praise God for that encounter indeed.

So, I am not necessarily talking about a conversion encounter, but I am talking about a consecrating encounter. I believe He wants each of us to have that kind of encounter today. I believe He wants this convention to have that kind of encounter.

I believe He wants to do something amazing in your life and my life and in this convention in these next few minutes. Let's come to His Word and see what He has to say to us this morning.

ISAIAH: A CONTEXTUALIZING ENCOUNTER

God has led me to the Old Testament book of Isaiah for our consideration this morning as we seek "A Life-Changing Encounter with God."

Isaiah was a prophet. Not just any prophet, some feel perhaps the greatest prophet of Israel. Isaiah was a statesman who spoke for God to common people and also to kings. He was known in the palace. In fact, he was a consultant to the monarchs. He prophesied during the reign of four kings, a time of great crisis, a time of great chaos, a time of moral decadence, a time when God's people were turning their backs on Him. In fact, during the time of Isaiah's prophecy, invaders took captive the northern kingdom of Israel. Assyria attacked the southern kingdom of Judah. These were unstable times, difficult times, and he had a very strategic ministry.

In the midst of these days of Isaiah there came along a king in Judah who, compared to the others, was a man of some influence, some goodness, some excellence. His name was Uzziah. He is mentioned in verse 1. Uzziah reigned for a long time – 52 years. He was generally a successful king and brought benefits to his people. In fact, he subdued most of the enemies of

Judah and brought the people of Judah some time of peace. He was able to turn Jerusalem into a fortified city, well equipped with arms for its own defense and he gave the people a great sense of security.

The sad story of Uzziah is that in the end, pride filled his heart. He looked at all the things he'd done, given them a time of peace from their enemies, fortified Jerusalem, brought security, developed agriculture and commerce. He was filled with pride and died of terminal leprosy.

Uzziah's death marks the timing of the events outlined for us in Isaiah 6: "In the year of King Uzziah's death ..." (Isaiah 6:1)

Apparently, the king's death sent shock waves through the nations. The people developed a sense of uneasiness and even fear. I believe the fear may have been greatest in the hearts of God-fearing Jews who through all these years maintained a true devotion to God. Because they knew that through the time of Uzziah there was an ever-increasing moral decadence, there was an ever-ascending disobedience, there was a defiant kind of idolatry. It was almost as if as long as Uzziah was around, he preserved the whole thing from coming apart at the seams.

But now Uzziah is gone and the people are left to wonder, "what next?" I wonder how many North Carolina Baptists in this room, or who are listening through some other media, are asking the same question today – "what next?"

Ours is a day characterized by crisis, chaos and moral decadence. Ours is a day where many of God's people are living with a sense of uneasiness and even fear. Many are wondering, "what next?" Many of you have come to this place today and you have lost your job or your pay has been cut and financially you are struggling – and you are asking "what next?"

Many may have come here today and you are hearing all the negativity and pessimism in our world and you are left to wonder – "what next?" Some of you have come here and if the truth be known you are fearful, uncertain and even depressed and deep inside you are asking – "what next?"

There are pastors in this room and you are struggling – nobody knows – maybe your wife does, maybe she doesn't – but you know.

You are struggling in your ministry.

You are struggling in your decision-making.

You are struggling in your sermon preparation.

You are struggling with your family responsibilities.

You are struggling in your identity as a man, a husband, a father and a minister.

Deep down you don't think you are supposed to be struggling with all of this, but in the depths of your being, you are asking "what next?"

For some of you, pastors, your churches, deacons, leaders, the people are on you. They are after you about anything and everything and you are tired. You are asking, "what next?"

For some of you, church members, your churches are struggling. You are going through difficult times. It's easy to blame the preacher. The problems might even be his fault. But you are wondering for your church, "what next?"

When we come together for these three days as North Carolina Baptists, we come as a people of God, but not as a people of God who have it all together. If we are all supposed to have it all together all the time in order to be here, then I need to leave. We ought to encourage one another. I don't have it all together all the time in my life and I dare say you don't either. Let's be honest with each other. We have come together these days as brothers and sisters in God's family. Let's be honest with each other enough to recognize that we are here with a lot of needs.

There are individuals who are struggling here today. For example, some have gotten bad news from the doctor. There are couples here today who are struggling. Don't you give up on each other. You do whatever it takes to bring healing to your relationship. There are parents here and you are struggling with some issue with your child or children. You hang in there. Don't give up. You are the best thing your children have going for them.

The list is endless and I cannot possibly name every scenario that may be a part of someone's life here today.

But here is what I can do -

Can I encourage you to do what Isaiah did?

In the midst of the turmoil of his day,
In the midst of the instability of his day,
In the midst of the fears of his day,
In the midst of all the bad news of his day,
In the midst of the pressures and stresses of his day,

The Bible says, "In the year of King Uzziah's death, I saw the Lord ..." (6:1)

I challenge us, North Carolina Baptists, to look to Jesus today. Will we look to Jesus for the needs in our lives? Will we look to Jesus for the needs in our families? Will we look to Jesus for the needs in our churches? Will we look to Jesus for the needs in this convention?

This convention has been through a lot of change, transition, over the past few years. Some have been discontented with denominations and with the convention. Let me say to you, having spent four years on this platform and meetings all over the place. I believe there are bright days ahead for North Carolina Baptists.

We have a great convention. We have a great, God-led leader in Milton Hollifield. We have a great convention staff. But for our convention to be all that God wants it to be, we must continually look to Jesus.

The Southern Baptist Convention is going through much transition in these days, needs much prayer, and is pursuing a Great Commission Resurgence. Ten commitment statements outline the Great Commission Resurgence. While I support this effort and I am praying for this effort and I support the commitment statements, in a very real sense, if we will just get serious about the first one, the rest of them will take care of themselves.

The first commitment statement says that we make “A Commitment to Christ’s Lordship.” Brothers and sisters, when Jesus is Lord of our lives, our families, our churches and our convention, most of the rest of the stuff takes care of itself.

When Jesus is Lord of our convention, we won’t have any problem being “gospel-centered” or adhering to the Great Commandments or carrying out the Great Commission. We get in trouble when we fail to look to Jesus. We need what Isaiah got – we need to see the Lord. We need to see Him ... “sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple.”

We need to see God on His throne. While in this time of tragedy, turmoil and transition, Isaiah realized God was still on His throne. He still reigns. Nothing could happen to change that. We need that kind of life-transforming encounter with God today.

Can you imagine the scene Isaiah saw? The majesty of God is so vividly depicted in this text. There are seraphim present. The word literally means, “burning ones.” These creatures of flame and light were involved in continuous worship and service to God.

The Bible says they each had six wings. With two wings they covered their faces, shielding themselves from the glory of God, symbolizing reverence and awe. With two wings they covered their feet to protect them from holy purity, representing humility. With two wings they kept flying, constantly ready for action or obedience in service. Here is a picture of the elements of true worship – reverence, humility and obedient service.

Our call, North Carolina Baptists, is to look to Jesus. Let us see the same One Isaiah saw. He saw the preincarnate Lord Jesus. We see the risen Lord Jesus sitting at the right hand of the Father making intercession for us. Let us have that awesome encounter with the Lord Jesus.

ISAIAH: A CONSECRATING ENCOUNTER

Not only did Isaiah see the Lord, he also heard from the Lord.

“And one called out 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 thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while
the temple was filling with smoke.” (6:3)

You cannot miss the holiness of God in this text. God’s holiness designates Him as separate from and other than man. Holiness signifies God’s nature, His power, His righteousness, His grace. No other attribute of God is given a three-fold declaration. Nowhere do we find in heavenly

worship the angels proclaiming, “love, love, love” or “mercy, mercy, mercy” or grace, grace, grace.” But God’s holiness – it is overwhelming. It is proclaimed antiphonally around the throne of God. “Holy, holy, holy!” “Holy, holy, holy.”

In verse 5, Isaiah speaks finally, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” Isaiah now saw himself and his desperate situation was clearly exposed to him.

When Isaiah said, “woe is me,” he is in reality saying something like this: Woe is me! I am ruined. I am crushed. I am shattered. I am dissolved. I am disintegrated. I am lost. I am cut off. I am destroyed. I’m sunk. I’ve had it!

Why? Because in the presence of God he recognized how unholy he was. I am a man of unclean lips. I am a sinner. His encounter with the living God gave him a clear realization of his own sin. He immediately confesses his sin before God.

Could this be our greatest need as we meet here on this November day in 2009? Could it be that the number one hindrance to our becoming the greatest force for evangelism this state has ever seen is us?

Could it be that our sin more than anything else is the one thing keeping us from being all that God wants us to be as individuals, families, churches, associations and this convention? Could it be in this very moment God is dealing with us concerning our individual and corporate sins?

I carry in my Bible this sin list produced by Life Action ministries. It is not an exhaustive list. I don’t think it even includes all of mine on it, but it is a challenging reminder to me.

May I share just a few of the ones listed here?

- Lack of love – Do you ever wonder why our Lord says so much to us about loving Him and one another?
- Pride – Do you think your pride ever stands in the way of what God wants to do in your life, family, church or even this convention? Sometimes we are all above ourselves when we need to be all about Jesus.
- Unforgiveness – Who do you need to forgive today? Church member? Pastor? Convention personnel? Who?
- Jealousy – Pastors are sometimes jealous of other pastors. Churches are sometimes jealous of other churches. When is the last time you prayed for the Lord’s blessing on sister churches in your community?
- Murmuring/Complaining – Have you ever known any murmuring Baptists?

- Gossip – Baptists’ version of unholy prayer requests. May God help us. If you cannot keep your mouth shut, you should not be a pastor. As a Christian, if you cannot keep your mouth shut, don’t let people confide in you. It will hurt them, you and the cause of Christ. It’s one of the most destructive sins there is to the body of Christ. Some people are looking for how to spin a story. Have you ever considered the truth?

You will not move forward in your relationship with the Lord until you deal with unconfessed sin in your life. The convention will not move forward in Kingdom business if we have issues of sin that keep us from hearing and heeding God’s Word to us. We must do what Isaiah did. Isaiah confessed his sin. Isaiah came to a point of total brokenness before God. He is crushed. He is shattered. He is emptied. He is broken.

Years ago, I read in one of Chuck Swindoll’s books this statement that he quoted from Dr. Alan Redpath. I have never forgotten it. The statement is this:

“When God wants to do an impossible task, He takes an impossible man and crushes him.”

Would you allow me to paraphrase Dr. Redpath’s statement for our context today?

“When God want to do an impossible task with North Carolina Baptists, He will take North Carolina Baptists and crush us.”

For us to be all God wants us to be, we must be broken before the Lord as was Isaiah. Here is the beautiful thing that we in this room know well. Look at verses 6 and 7:

“Then one of the seraphim flew to me, with a burning coal in his hand which he had taken from the altar with tongs. And he touched my mouth with it and said, ‘Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven.’”

Do you see what God does with this broken man before him? I can explain it in one word: grace. God stands ready to forgive and cleanse our sin. God stands ready to restore us and renew us and revive us. God deals with sin immediately and completely. God deals with sin at its source in our lives.

Isaiah said I am a man of unclean lips. The burning coal was placed to his mouth. Immediately upon his confession, God enacted his process of forgiveness. There was no waiting period. There was no probation. It was immediate.

That’s what excites me about these moments together here. God is prepared to do some immediate healing and cleansing in our lives and maybe in this convention in these very moments. Here we are on the precipice of another of those awe-stricken moments in the presence of the living Lord. Because we know something Isaiah did not know – we know about the cross. Isaiah prophesized about the coming Savior and the Suffering Servant, but we know His Name. We can call upon His name. When we have such an encounter, we call on the name of Jesus. For we know He is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God. Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace.

We know He was pierced for our transgressions; crushed for our iniquities; by His stripes we are healed.

Jesus is our Savior. It is Jesus who said, "Go and sin no more." It is Jesus who said "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus – our Redeemer, our Master, our Savior, our Lord. It is to His cross we come and receive forgiveness, cleansing, healing, renewal, restoration and revival for our lives, our families, our churches and this convention.

COMMISSIONING ENCOUNTER

When we have had this kind of life-changing encounter with God, then we can hear God's question to us – the same one He asked Isaiah:

"Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?"

Isn't that the question before us, North Carolina Baptists?

Isn't God coming at us this morning and asking questions like:

Who will go and plant new churches to reach all the peoples of North Carolina?

Who will go and faithfully work to revitalize existing Baptist churches to make them effective in Kingdom efforts?

Who will come alongside pastors and leaders and encourage them in their work?

Who will stay faithful to the task God has called you even if it doesn't have a lot of excitement to it yet?

Who will faithfully seek to live out the Great Commandments?

Who will faithfully seek to carry out the Great Commission?

Who will be My salt and who will be My light today and in the generations to come?

If we don't, who do we think will? What excuses will we give for not answering His call to us?

Some years ago, I read a parable written by Max Lucado called the "Parable of the Candles."

Will you listen to it as we consider our Lord's question to us this morning, "Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?"

There was a blackout one night. When the lights went out, I fumbled to the closet where we keep the candles for nights like this. I lit four of them.

I was turning to leave with the large candle in my hand when I heard a voice, "Now, hold it right there."

"Who said that?"

"I did." The voice was near my hand.

"Who are you? What are you?"

"I'm a candle."

I lifted up the candle to take a closer look. There was a tiny face in the wax.

"Don't take me out of here!"

"What?"

"I said, Don't take me out of this room."

"What do you mean? I have to take you out. You're a candle. Your job is to give light. It's dark out there."

"But you can't take me out. I'm not ready," the candle explained with pleading eyes. "I need more preparation."

I couldn't believe my ears. "More preparation?"

"Yeah, I've decided I need to research this job of light-giving so I won't go out and make a bunch of mistakes. You'd be surprised how distorted the glow of an untrained candle can be...."

"All right then," I said. "You're not the only candle on the shelf. I'll blow you out and take the others!"

But right then I heard other voices, "We aren't going either!" I turned to the other candles, "You are candles and your job is to light dark places!"

"Well, that may be what you think," said the first one, "You may think we have to go, but I'm busy. I'm meditating on the importance of light. It's really enlightening."

"And you other two," I asked, "are you going to stay too?"

A short, fat, purple candle with plump cheeks spoke up. "I'm waiting to get my life together, I'm not stable enough."

The last candle had a female voice, very pleasant to the ear. "I'd like to help," she explained, "but lighting the darkness is not my gift. I'm a singer. I sing to other candles to encourage them to burn more brightly."

She began a rendition of "This Little Light of Mine." The other three joined in, filling the closet with singing. I took a step back and considered the absurdity of it all. Four perfectly healthy candles singing to each other about light but refusing to come out of the closet.

And again God's question:

“Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?”

The need is great. The time is urgent. Isaiah's response: "Here am I. Send me!" What is yours? What is mine?

Let me close with this story.

As many of you did, I went to the Southern Baptist Convention meeting in Louisville this past June. Normally I drive to most events if at all possible. However, for this one I found one of those discount flights and I thought it would save me time, money and the energy of making the drive alone, because Lesley could not go.

My flight schedule was to leave Greensboro early Monday morning, stop over in Memphis and then onto Louisville. I was to be in Louisville by around 11 and I was looking forward to catching the afternoon and evening sessions of the pastor's conference.

The flight to Memphis was perfect. Right on time. No problem. Very enjoyable. Had enough time in the Memphis airport to get some breakfast before the next flight. It came time for the next flight and we boarded the plane on time. It was hot on the plane. The air conditioning was not working but they assured us it would be fine when we got up in the air. Long story short, it never got up in the air. After sitting on the plane for about an hour, they told us to get off the plane while they worked on it. Now, don't misunderstand, I am all for them working on it before it takes off with me on it. More time passed. I now was ready to eat lunch at the same place I ate breakfast in the Memphis airport. Then, they canceled the flight.

So I got in line with everyone else, thinking all the while, "why did you not just drive?" When it came my turn, the lady at the counter said that I would have to fly to Chicago and then catch a flight from there onto Louisville. I said ok. I had never been to Chicago. This was turning into an adventure. So I decided to see where it was going to take me.

Finally, we flew to Chicago. I had to hurry to the next gate to catch the flight to Louisville. Again, after waiting my turn in line, I handed my paper to the lady at the counter and she looked at it, typed some things on her keyboard and then looked up at me with these chilling words:

"You are not confirmed on this flight. It is full. You are not getting on it."

I was stunned. I said, "Excuse me." She said it again. I said, "nobody in Memphis said anything about not being confirmed. What am I going to do?" She said I don't know. I pleaded with her, "Will you help me?" End of the story is she did. I ended up in Cincinnati about 10:00 that night, caught a ride to Louisville and got there close to midnight. My luggage showed up about 18 hours after that.

But here's the reason I tell you the story. There is going to come a moment for a whole lot of people when they are going to stand before the Lord Jesus Christ and they are going to hear these chilling words:

"Sorry, you are not confirmed for entrance into my heaven."

Or to be more scripturally correct:

“Depart from me. I never knew you.”

Some will be stunned. Some will ask, “Will you help me?” Some will say, “No one back in North Carolina ever said anything about needing confirmation!”

The sad thing is that there will be no other gates, no other planes, no other rides to catch, no other options. It will be final. North Carolina Baptists, we have the message of confirmation. We have the message of salvation. We have the blessed gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And God is asking us, “Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?”

Will we respond with Isaiah, “Here am I. Send me!”

I am asking you, North Carolina Baptists, will we be the ones? More personally, will you be one? I believe God is coming at us this morning in a mighty way. God is among us. We are having a life-changing encounter.