

## **“People of Unclean Lips”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

Trinity Sunday

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*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. <sup>2</sup>Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. <sup>3</sup>And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” <sup>4</sup>The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.*

*<sup>5</sup>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!” <sup>6</sup>Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. <sup>7</sup>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.” <sup>8</sup>Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (Isaiah 6:1-8)*

I don’t want to put anyone on the spot, but if you are willing to share, by a show of hands, how many of you have ever had your mouths washed out with soap?

I have not had that experience, but I still have something in common with everyone who raised their hands.

Some of you might remember Mad Libs. I think they still print them, but in back in the day Mad Libs were cheap game books you could get at the drug store that had a short story or paragraph printed on each page. The trick was that each story had about 10 to 12 words removed and replaced with a blank line. Each blank was labeled with the kind of word that should be in that space – a noun, verb, adjective, proper name, etc. The was game was for two. One person held the book and a pencil; the other was completely in the dark, unaware of what the story was even about. The person holding the book would go blank by blank, calling out the part of speech needed. The other person would then call out whatever word came to mind, and that word was inserted into the story. When the page was complete, the two would read the story together, and hilarity would usually ensue, because the resulting story was so absurd.

Well, one day in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, my friend Sam brought a Mad Libs book to school, and we had some free time, and I expect you know where this is headed. Wouldn’t it be hilarious, we thought, to bring our rapidly growing 5<sup>th</sup> grade glossary of bad words to bear on this literary exercise? In the back of the room during study hall, we snickered our way through two Mad Libs, employing every profanity we could think of. We had an absolute blast. But we also knew that we needed to destroy the evidence, because if the telltale sheets were to be discovered, the repercussions would be swift and terrible. So we ripped out the pages and calmly carried them to the trash can.

We figured we were in the clear... until minutes later, when a girl in our class who knew what we had been doing sauntered up to the trash can. The world fell into slow motion as we watched with horror as she reached in, retrieved the crumpled evidence, smoothed out the papers, and presented them with disdainful pride to our teacher. “Look at what Peter



and Sam wrote." Her name has been withheld to protect her identity, but she knows what she did.

Anyway, the rest of my day was a marathon of mental and emotional anguish, beginning with a trip to the principal's office, and ending with that fateful moment when my dad came home from work. I never got the mouthful of soap treatment, presumably because my crime was written instead of spoken. But I assure you, that night, my hands got a thorough washing with soap. So, I know your pain.

In all seriousness, I also know -- just as all of us here know -- what Isaiah meant when standing in the presence of the pure righteousness and holiness of God, he cried out, "*Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.*" In a powerful vision, Isaiah is mystically transported into the throne room of God. The scene is immediately intimidating. God's presence is so huge that even the hem of his robe fills the room. Smoke is everywhere. Heavenly attendants are swirling around the throne, singing in one voice the same phrase that we sang a few minutes ago: "Holy, Holy, Holy." And their song was so powerful that the foundations were shaking. Isaiah realized immediately that he had no business being in there... no business being this close to the pure goodness and righteousness of God. The faithful believed that no one who had even a trace of impurity or darkness in them could possibly survive being in the direct presence of God. So, Isaiah immediately knew he was in real trouble.

I have to think it was the singing that made Isaiah mention his voice. There were so many ways that Isaiah could have felt embarrassed and self-conscious about standing before God, so many aspects of his life that were in some way unclean. Why would he focus on his unclean mouth? I expect the overwhelming impulse would be to join with the chorus of angels who were singing their praises to God, but he did not dare do that. He felt like his own voice was too polluted, too impure to utter such a glorious song in that unblemished place. He could not bring himself to sing, because he was a man of unclean lips, who lived among an entire people of unclean lips.

If we had to pick one thing about ourselves to sum up our impurity, perhaps it is not such a bad choice. The words we speak, the ways we speak, reveal so much about us. As the book of Proverbs says, "*Death and life are in the power of the tongue...*" (18:21). Or as the epistle of James says, "*No one can tame the tongue—[it is] a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.*" (James 3:8-9). Words have the power to heal and the power to harm, the power to bless and the power to curse. How many times have words slipped past our lips, and you immediately regret having uttered them? How many times have we longed to be able to take them back, but the terrible toothpaste is already out of the tube, and there is no putting it back in? We are all aware of ways that we have polluted the world, detracted from the beauty and goodness of the world, with unclean words that have come from our unclean lips.

We are also aware, perhaps more than ever before, that we are a society of unclean lips. Political discourse has always been charged, but over the past ten years it feels like every year it gets a little worse. People talk to one another and about one another with such open disrespect, even disgust. The words that pass our lips are angry, violent, crude, and profane. The things that Sam and I were punished for writing silently on a Mad Lib sheet are now spoken openly and without embarrassment in most 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms in America. In the 1700's, the famous preacher John Wesley, who was known for his personal

piety, made the confession, "I am an unclean branch of an unclean tree."<sup>1</sup> Three hundred years later, our societal tree is now a diseased, rotten, termite-ridden mess.

But there is good news. As a woeful Isaiah braced for incineration by the all-encompassing, overwhelming holiness of God, a few seconds passed... and then a few more. As it began to dawn on him that he might actually survive this encounter, one of the angels from the heavenly choir flew to the altar of incense, drew a glowing coal out of the fire, and turned toward Isaiah. Touching the red-hot ember against Isaiah's unclean lips, the angel said, "Your guilt has departed; your sin is blotted out." Having received this heavenly gift of mercy, grace, and forgiveness, a cleansed and renewed Isaiah is ready to receive his heavenly commission and begin his ministry as a prophet of Israel.

It is an Old Testament story, but it is also a gospel story. In a hopeless place, hope showed up. In the face of certain death, new life was given. A man of unclean lips, who came from a people of unclean lips, is cleansed of impurity. The wound of his sin was cauterized, and his spirit was purified and empowered for a new purpose, a new calling to show others the way to healing and restoration in their own lives.

And we have to believe, that if there is hope for a foul-mouthed guy like Isaiah, there has to be hope for us too. There is hope for people of unclean lips... people with clouded vision... people with calloused feelings, angry fists, and broken hearts. At some point we will all draw near to the purifying and powerful presence of God, and whatever is out of kilter within us will be made straight, whatever is polluted will be cleansed, and whatever is wrong will be made right.

Admittedly, the process of healing whatever is broken in us might not be easy. A hot iron to the lips sounds painful to me. So, our individual roads to purification may be painful, and they may take longer than we would like. But we are assured that, when we make it to the end of that road, there will be grace, there will be redemption, and there will likely be a new calling, something that God will want us to do... something that God has always wanted us to do.

So, people of unclean lips, fear not. Yes, it would be wise for us to take heed of the many warnings in scripture about our foul mouths, reminders that:

*... "rash words are like thrusts of the sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing ..."*<sup>2</sup>

*... that "a soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger ..."*

*... [that] A gentle tongue is a tree of life, but perverse [talk] breaks the spirit."*<sup>3</sup>

We should heed the preaching of Paul, who urges us to "Put to death ... whatever in [us] is earthly" ... to get rid of "things [like] anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language" from our mouths.<sup>4</sup>

"Let no evil talk come out of your mouths," he continues, "but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear."<sup>5</sup>

I think that is one of the most basic things God wants from us; God hopes that the words we put out into the world do not tear people down, but build people up. I like to think that is what Isaiah remembered most about his mystical trip into the throne room of God... that

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<sup>1</sup> John Wesley, Notes on the Bible, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/notes.ii.xxiv.vii.ii.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Proverbs 12:18.

<sup>3</sup> Proverbs 15:1-4.

<sup>4</sup> Colossians 3:5-8.

<sup>5</sup> Ephesians 4:29.

it wasn't the pain of the hot coal on his lips, but the memory of someone who loved him enough to correct him, heal him, so that he could be an ambassador for the good things God wants for us.

I think that is what we should remember, too, about those times when we received corrective reminders. Not the foul taste of a bar of soap... not the sting of getting busted when our crumpled, unclean language was retrieved from the bin and we got what was coming to us... but the fact that there were people in our lives who cared enough about us, and saw enough good potential in us, to redirect our eyes and to refocus our words on things that are true, honorable, just, and pure.<sup>6</sup>

May heaven give us the power and the will, when we get these calls to be God's people in the world, to answer as Isaiah did: "*Here I am, Lord. Send me.*" **Amen.**

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<sup>6</sup> Philippians 4:8-9.