

In just 13 verses, today's reading from Isaiah takes us from transcendent awe to shock and dread. It's a little much, but I think there's a point to it—it forces us to hold both of those together, and to realize that God is present and at work—large and in charge—even when hell seems to occupy earth.

The beginning, “in the year that King Uzziah died,” refers to a new period of political uncertainty after a 50-year reign of stability. Isaiah says that he saw the Lord sitting on a throne, and the hem of God's robe filled the temple. God is very, very big. All around God are seraphs, these heavenly creatures whose name refers to fire; they're covering their eyes because the splendor of God is too great for *them*, and they're calling out and responding to each other, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts.” Isaiah is appalled. “I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, . . . yet my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts!” What he's trying to convey here is, it's as if he'd strolled over to the temple intending to do some contemplation or prayer, and when he stepped through the door it wasn't just the Temple, it was the throne room of God. *He does not belong there*. This is not a setting for ordinary people, however well-intentioned. This is so intensely holy, he's like a slug on a wedding cake.

One of the seraphs acknowledges the truth of what Isaiah says, but he has a fix for it: he holds a burning coal to Isaiah's lips, and his sin is blotted out. Then God calls for a volunteer, and even though Isaiah doesn't know what the task will be, he volunteers. “Here am I; send me.” He volunteers not because he thinks he can do whatever it is, but because he wants to be part of whatever God might be doing.

It turns out, though, that God wants him to go prophesy ineffectually. God is so fed up with the people that God's not interested in having them repent. Maybe it's just due diligence

to send a prophet, but basically God is commissioning Isaiah to undertake a commission that will never bear fruit. “Make the mind of this people dull, . . . so that they may not . . . turn and be healed.” “How long, Lord,” Isaiah asks in dismay, and God says, until everything has been destroyed. “Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is utterly desolate.” There will be nothing left that is alive, and the only seed of life will be the burnt stump.

That is such a quick, dramatic transition, from the grandeur of God’s throne room to the comprehensive death and emptiness that will come upon the people of God. It really forces us to hold them both together, instead of enjoying the throne room scene for its awesomeness, or viewing the prophecy of doom as something distant and conditional. That enthroned God is saying, “The next order of business is for you to go tell people, in a way they can’t understand, that they’re doomed, and there will be no respite or no rebirth until the destruction has been total.”

I guess this is about the reality of destruction. Everything ends. Everyone dies. It feels especially frightening now, knowing that human activity is changing our climate, and that we may reach a tipping point beyond which there is no healing or redemption of the ecosphere. The metaphor of burning suggests thorough, utter devastation, not something after which you pick up the pieces and start over again. “. . . an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.”

For most of us, the concern about climate change is largely a concern about our children and grandchildren, or just the younger people who will have to live in this world when we’re gone. I hear my daughters and their friends say that they’re not sure it’s right to bring a new

child into the world as it's going, and they're serious. Yet some of them do, and they have to raise their children in a way appropriate to the challenges, which is to say, they will have to raise their children to be resilient and resourceful. Helicopter parenting can protect kids from a lot of things, but it's no match for climate change or the failure of political institutions and social unrest. Children will have to be raised to be resilient.

In fact, all of us have to be resilient. Resilience means that although trauma knocks you down, you know how to get up again. You carry scars and walk with a limp, maybe, but you are well and truly alive and, perhaps, able to "go for" God if given a little divine repair by a seraph. My favorite model of resilience at the moment is Stacy Abrams. Stacy Abrams served in the Georgia state legislature for 11 years and in 2018 ran for governor on the Democratic ticket. Her opponent, Brian Kemp, was the secretary of state at the time, and thus in charge of maintaining the voter rolls. Since the Voting Rights Act had been gutted by the Supreme Court in 2013, the state was able to cut 10% of its polling places to the disadvantage of mainly Black voters. More than 1 million Georgians had been purged from voter rolls, with nearly 670,000 cancelled from the rolls in 2017. An Associated Press [analysis revealed](#) that 70% of the cancelled voters were Black. Although Kemp clearly had a conflict of interest, nobody stopped him and he won the governor's race.

Stacy Abrams is the daughter of two Methodist ministers, both civil rights activists. So after Kemp claimed the governor's mansion she continued the voting rights work she had started before the campaign. The combined efforts of her new organization, Fair Fight, and the one she had previously established, the New Georgia Project, are credited with registering 800K voters in the state. Georgia turnout in this last election was a million more voters than in 2016.

And as we know, Georgia's electoral votes were blue this year for the first time since 1992, and there's a possibility that one or both of the Democratic Senate candidates will win in a run-off election in December.

Obviously my party preferences have me stoked, but I'm really just pointing out how resilient Stacy Abrams is. She didn't deny the defeat she suffered in 2018, but she also picked herself up and did some really remarkable organizing to change the field on which the next contest would be held. What's more, she provided a vehicle for others, perhaps less gifted but nevertheless legitimate citizens, to exercise *their* power to change the field. She helped other people be resilient in a disastrous time. How did she learn to be so resilient? One anecdote gives us a lot to chew on:

both of her parents became United Methodist ministers, and her family's values were "faith, service, education, and responsibility." *Note that faith and service precede all else.*

Abrams delivered a powerful anecdote about our responsibility to one another. She explained that her family only owned one car, and her father sometimes had to walk and hitchhike the thirty miles home from work. One rainy night, her mother grew worried, so she loaded the family in the car and went looking for her husband. They found him walking along the roadside soaked, shivering, and without a coat.

When Abrams' father got in the car, his family asked what happened to his coat.

"He explained that he'd given it to a homeless man he'd met on the highway. When we asked why he'd given away his only jacket, my dad turned to us and said, '*I knew when I left that man, he would still be alone, but I could give him my coat because I knew you were coming for me.*'"

<https://extranewsfeed.com/stacey-abrams-prophet-of-the-religious-left-3bd28ec690e6>

Stacy Abrams is a remarkable person—brilliant, energetic, talented. Few of us have all her gifts. But what that story points to is that she developed the gift of resilience in a family who took seriously the idea that God is love. They loved God, they knew God loved them, and she grew up having people she could count on. Her formative years were among people she

could count on. That is something we can do for all the people in our lives—be trustworthy.

We cannot guarantee the future or do enough advance work to smooth the path for those who come after us. But we can reliably enact love and responsiveness to others, so that they are resilient—so that someday, if all there is left is a burnt-over stump, it will still have living, green roots to generate new life.

God of heaven and earth,

As you cleansed Isaiah with a coal of fire to prepare him for proclaiming your word to the world, prepare us, so that we may know your bidding and carry out our callings with eagerness and urgency. Show the world greatness that cannot be contained any more than smoke or fire can be caught, in the name of the one who sacrificed everything to carry out your commands, Jesus Christ our sanctifier. Amen.