

Here Am I, Send Me

Isaiah 6 • Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

DISCOVERY AIM

Participants discover that Isaiah's call comes in a temple vision of heavenly worship, and that the worship has never stopped: the seraphim's "*Holy, holy, holy*" is the Sanctus they sing at every Mass, and the burning coal that touches the prophet's unclean lips is read by the Fathers as a figure of the Eucharist. They also discover the anatomy of every vocation: a vision of holiness, a collapse into honest unworthiness, a purification we do not perform on ourselves, and only then the question, "*Whom shall I send?*" Finally they solve last week's puzzle: where Isaiah got his favorite name for God.

CATHOLIC TOUCHSTONE

The Mass, from the Sanctus to the altar. Before proclaiming the Gospel, the priest quietly prays that God cleanse his heart and his lips; the older form of the Roman Rite names tonight's scene outright, asking to be cleansed as the lips of the prophet Isaiah were, with a burning coal. Isaiah 6 is not background to the liturgy; it is inside the liturgy, every single day. And Isaiah 6 is the anatomy of discernment for every young adult asking what God wants of their life.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The date matters: "*in the year that King Uzziah died,*" around 740 BC. Uzziah had reigned fifty-two mostly prosperous years; his death was the end of an era, with Assyria massing on the horizon. But there is a darker irony your group will discover live: Uzziah died a leper, struck at the altar of incense when he proudly usurped the priests' office (2 Chronicles 26:16-21). Hold that story back for the discovery. A king was disfigured for grasping at the altar; a sinner is healed by what is taken from it. The difference is not the altar. It is presumption versus confession.

The vision itself is liturgical from the first line: throne, temple, the hem of the robe filling the sanctuary, smoke (incense), the altar, and a hymn. The seraphim, *burning ones* in Hebrew, appear by that name only here in all of Scripture. Their triple "*Holy*" is, on the plain level, the Hebrew superlative: holy to the highest degree, holiness beyond category. Many Fathers also heard in the threefold cry a whisper of the Trinity; you can share that reading as the tradition's meditation while being honest that the text's own grammar is the superlative. Both are true readings at different depths.

Then the structure every vocation follows. Isaiah does not volunteer first. He collapses: "*Woe is me! For I am lost.*" The Catechism quotes this exact cry when it describes what happens to anyone who truly encounters the living God (CCC 208). Purification comes to him, from outside, from the altar, by fire, at the touch of an angel: "*your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven.*" Only after that does he hear the question and answer it. Cleansing precedes commission; nobody sends themselves.

Do not skip verses 9-13. Isaiah's actual assignment is brutal: preach to a people who will not listen, until the land is desolate. This is one of the most quoted passages in the New Testament: Jesus cites it to explain the parables (Matthew 13), John cites it to explain unbelief (John 12), Paul cites it as his last recorded Scripture in Acts (28:26-27). It is also the site of tonight's steelman on divine hardening. And its last line hides a seed, literally: "*The holy seed is its stump*" (6:13). Plant that phrase and say nothing more. It germinates in Session 4.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Roots. The throne vision stands in the line of Sinai: glory, smoke, fire, and a mediator who cannot survive the sight unaided (Exodus 19; 33:20, "*man shall not see me and live*"). The coal comes from an altar in the vision (compare the censer coals of Leviticus 16:12), and the sequence of guilt confessed, atonement applied, and mission given mirrors the Day of Atonement logic. Uzziah's sin (2 Chronicles 26) is the dark inversion looming over the whole scene.

Fulfillment. John 12:39-41 makes the boldest claim in the New Testament's use of Isaiah: after quoting this chapter, John writes, "*Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him.*" Whose glory? In John's grammar, Christ's. The King on the throne, high and lifted up, is the Lord Jesus; and John has already told us the Son of Man must be "*lifted up*" (John 3:14; 12:32), his throne a cross. Revelation 4:8 shows the hymn still going: the four living creatures "*never cease to sing, 'Holy, holy, holy.'*" And the Church on earth joins that unending song at every Mass in the Sanctus (CCC 1352).

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. John Chrysostom • *Homilies on Isaiah 6 (In illud, Vidi Dominum)*

Preaching a whole series on this one chapter, St. John Chrysostom dwells on the seraphim covering their faces: the burning ones, sinless spirits of fire, cannot bear to gaze directly on the divine glory. If they veil themselves, he asks, what reverence is owed by us, who approach the same holy God in the liturgy? Awe is not the opposite of intimacy with God; it is its doorway.

St. John Damascene • *On the Orthodox Faith, Book 4*

Teaching on the Eucharist, St. John Damascene reaches instinctively for this chapter: let us receive the Body and Blood, he says, as a burning coal, for the coal Isaiah saw was not plain wood but wood united to fire, as the Bread of the Eucharist is not plain bread but bread united to divinity. What the seraph brought to one prophet's lips with tongs, the priest places on ours.

St. Thomas Aquinas • *Commentary on Isaiah*

In his very first work as a young professor, St. Thomas comments on this scene and draws out its order: purification comes before mission. No one worthily announces the word of God whose own lips have not first been cleansed, and the cleansing is God's work, offered through his ministers, not something the prophet performs on himself. Grace equips whom God sends.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 208.** Faced with God's presence, man discovers his own smallness. The Catechism quotes Isaiah 6:5 directly, alongside Peter's "*depart from me, for I am a sinful man*" (Luke 5:8). Have both texts ready; the parallel is one of tonight's discoveries.
- **CCC 1352.** In the Eucharistic Prayer the whole congregation joins the unending praise that the Church sings with the angels: the Sanctus. The seraphim's hymn is on your group's lips every Sunday whether they knew it or not.
- **CCC 1137-1139.** The liturgy we celebrate on earth is a participation in the heavenly liturgy that Isaiah and John both saw. One liturgy, two locations.

THREAD WATCH

THREADS TONIGHT

The Holy One of Israel: origin revealed. Last week the title appeared in an accusation. Tonight the group discovers what stands behind it: at his call he heard the seraphim sing holiness as God's defining attribute, and the title is his lifelong echo of that song. Every time he writes *the Holy One of Israel* for the rest of his life, he is echoing the song he heard that day. Keep tracking the title; it is not finished with us.

The holy seed (6:13). One line at the very end of a devastating commission: the felled tree's stump holds a holy seed. Do not explain it. It sprouts in Session 4.

Lips. Unclean lips cleansed by fire from the altar. Watch what Isaiah says about mouths, words, and the word from here on; and note where the group hears an echo at Mass.

SESSION GOALS

1. Discover Uzziah's death by leprosy at the altar (2 Chronicles 26) and articulate the contrast between presumption and confession before the holy God.
2. Trace the anatomy of vocation in 6:1-8: vision, unworthiness, purification from outside, commission.
3. Connect the Sanctus, the priest's pre-Gospel prayer, and the Damascene's coal to the Mass.
4. Run the hardening steelman on 6:9-10 at full strength and answer it from Scripture and CCC 311, 600, and 1037.
5. Discover John 12:41: Isaiah saw the glory of Christ.
6. Resolve the origin of *the Holy One of Israel* and plant *the holy seed*.

TIME NOTE (90 MINUTES)

SUGGESTED CLOCK

Gather and opening prayer, 5 min. Win, 10 min. Build, 55 min. Send, 10 min. Live It, memory verse, Take-Home, closing prayer, 10 min.

Pre-chosen cuts if running long: cut Question 9 (Revelation 4) first; compress Question 3 (seraphim description) second. Never cut the Uzziah discovery, the steelman, or the John 12 discovery.

Here Am I, Send Me

Isaiah 6 • Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Holy, holy, holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory, and so is this room, whether we feel it or not.

Show us tonight what Isaiah saw, enough of your holiness to be honest about ourselves, and enough of your mercy to stop hiding. And if you ask for someone to send, give us the nerve to answer.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN • OPENING QUESTIONS

1. Describe a moment when something genuinely awed you: a mountain, an ocean, a birth, a piece of music. What did the awe do to you?
2. When you hear the word *calling* or *vocation*, what is your honest gut reaction: excitement, pressure, confusion, fear of what God might ask?

BUILD • INDUCTIVE STUDY

The Throne Room (Isaiah 6:1-4)

1. Read Isaiah 6:1-4 aloud, slowly. Verse 1 dates the vision: “*in the year that King Uzziah died.*” Isaiah could have written the year by number. Why anchor the vision of the true King to the death of an earthly one?

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

Uzziah reigned fifty-two years; almost nobody in Judah could remember another king, and Assyria was rising. The nation's visible throne was suddenly empty and the future dark. That is the year Isaiah is shown the throne that is never empty. The vision answers the anxiety: the LORD is sitting, not pacing; his robe's hem alone fills the temple. When your visible securities die, that is often precisely when God shows you what was holding the world up all along.

LIVE DISCOVERY

There is more to Uzziah's death than old age, and it happened in this very temple. Hunt down how King Uzziah's reign ended: 2 Chronicles 26, second half of the chapter. Pairs, 3-4 minutes.

ANSWER *(share after the discussion)*

2 Chronicles 26:16-21. At the height of his success, Uzziah's heart grew proud; he entered the temple to burn incense on the altar of incense, an office God had given to the priests alone. Confronted by eighty priests, he raged, and leprosy broke out on his forehead. He died a leper, cut off from the house of the LORD.

Now feel the contrast Isaiah has built into one verse of dating. A king grasps at the altar in

presumption and is struck unclean at his forehead. A prophet confesses he is unclean and is healed at his lips by a coal from the altar. Same temple, an altar in each scene, opposite postures, opposite endings. The altar is not a place for the confident; it is a place for the confessed.

2. Verses 2-4: look at the seraphim. What do they do with their six wings, and what does the arithmetic of their wings tell you?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Two wings cover the face: even sinless spirits of fire do not gawk at God. Two cover the feet: creaturely modesty before the Creator. Two fly: service. Four wings for reverence, two for work. The name *seraphim* means *burning ones*, and this is the only chapter in all of Scripture where they appear by name. Their posture is a homily: adoration comes first, and mission flows out of it, twice as much reverence as activity.

3. The seraphim's song: "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.*" Two questions. First: Hebrew has no word for *holiest*, so how does it say it? Second: where have you sung this song?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Hebrew makes a superlative by repetition, and a triple repetition is Hebrew's strongest intensification: God is not just holy, or holier, but holy in a degree beyond every category. No other divine attribute in Scripture receives the triple. Many Fathers also heard in the threefold cry a hint of the Trinity, one God thrice named; that is the tradition's meditation on a text whose plain grammar is the superlative, and both readings can be held together.

And your group has sung it, at every single Mass: the Sanctus, immediately before the Eucharistic Prayer. *Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your glory.* The Catechism says that at that moment the congregation joins the unending praise of the angels (CCC 1352). The song has not stopped since Isaiah heard it; at Mass you are not imitating the seraphim, you are joining them mid-verse (CCC 1137-1139).

Note also what the song claims: the whole *earth* is full of his glory. The seraphim see what we usually do not. Holiness is not God's distance from the world; the world is drenched in him.

4. And one more solved mystery: last week we marked Isaiah's favorite name for God, *the Holy One of Israel*, and asked where he got it. Now you know. Where?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

From the seraphim. Isaiah heard holiness sung as God's defining attribute in the year of his call, and he never recovered. The seraphim sing holiness itself, not the title; the title is Isaiah's own way of carrying their song for the rest of his life. Roughly twenty-five times across this book he will call God *the Holy One of Israel*, and each time he is echoing the liturgy he heard at his call. Notice the wonder of the title's second half: the thrice-holy One, before whom seraphim hide their faces, has attached his name to *Israel*, to a people. Infinite holiness, and he wants to be ours. That is the tension the whole book lives in.

Woe, Coal, and Commission (Isaiah 6:5-8)

5. Verse 5: what exactly does Isaiah say when he sees the King? Compare his reaction with Simon Peter's in Luke 5:8, the miraculous catch of fish.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips." Isaiah has pronounced woes on others (chapter 5, six of them); now he turns the woe on himself. Peter, kneeling in a boat full of fish, says the same thing in different words: *"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."* The Catechism pairs these two cries (CCC 208): the authentic mark of meeting the living God is not inflation but honest collapse. And notice what God does with neither man: he does not depart, and he does not agree to the woe. Both get cleansed and commissioned. If your prayer life has never once made you say *woe is me*, ask whether you have been meeting God or a comfortable idea of him.

6. Verses 6-7: walk through the coal slowly. Where does it come from, who carries it, where does it touch, and what is declared?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

From the altar; carried by a seraph with tongs, as if even a burning one handles it with care; to the lips, the exact site of the confessed uncleanness; and a declaration is spoken over him: *"your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven."* Isaiah does not cleanse himself. Purification comes from outside, from the altar, through a minister, by fire, with a word of absolution. If that sequence sounds familiar, it should: it is the shape of the sacraments. We confess; God's fire, carried by his ministers, does what no scrubbing of our own could do. Last week's verse is happening in front of us: scarlet made white, and God doing the whitening.

DIG DEEPER • The Coal on Your Tongue

Before proclaiming the Gospel at Mass, the priest bows and quietly prays that God cleanse his heart and his lips; in the older form of the Roman Rite the prayer names tonight's scene outright: *Cleanse my heart and my lips, almighty God, who cleansed the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a burning coal.* And the Fathers went further: St. John Damascene says we should receive the Eucharist as *a burning coal*, for as Isaiah's coal was wood united to fire, the Bread is bread united to divinity. The Eastern liturgies to this day call the Eucharist the live coal as the priest gives Communion. What a seraph once brought to one man's lips with tongs is placed on yours at every Mass. Approach accordingly.

7. Verse 8: only now does God speak, and he asks a question: *"Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"* Why does the question come after the coal and not before? And notice: God does not address Isaiah directly. Why might that matter?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Before the coal, Isaiah is a man under woe; volunteers under guilt serve out of fear or self-repair. Cleansing precedes commission, as St. Thomas observes on this very verse: no one worthily carries God's word whose lips God has not first made clean, and grace equips whom God sends. And the question is left open, overheard rather than assigned, because God wants a freely offered *yes*. He could command; instead he wonders aloud, and leaves room. Isaiah's answer is the shortest vocation story in Scripture: *"Here am I! Send me."* He volunteers before hearing a single detail of the job. That is what a cleansed heart sounds like: available before informed.

The Hard Commission (Isaiah 6:9-13)

8. Read Isaiah 6:9-10, the actual assignment. State it plainly: what is Isaiah told his preaching will accomplish?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

He is told, with bitter irony, to preach in a way that will not be heard: hearts will grow fat, ears heavy, eyes shut, *“lest they see... and understand... and turn and be healed.”* Isaiah's job description is faithful failure: decades of preaching to a people who will not listen. He asks the only sane question, *“How long, O Lord?”* and the answer is: until the land is desolate (vv. 11-12). God does not promise his messengers success; he promises them his word. Let that reframe every ministry disappointment in the room.

STEELMAN • BUILD IT AT FULL STRENGTH

Make the strongest case for this reading: **God deliberately hardens people so they cannot repent, and their unbelief is his doing.** Argue it with conviction:

The grammar of 6:10 is purpose, not accident: shut their eyes *lest* they turn and be healed. John 12:39-40 sharpens it: *“Therefore they could not believe. For Isaiah again said, ‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart.’”* Could not. Add Pharaoh, whose heart God says he will harden (Exodus 4:21), and Romans 9:18: *“He has mercy upon whomever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomever he wills.”* On this reading, some people are simply passed over, and saving grace is not given to all. Serious Reformed Christians hold this while still preaching to everyone, since God ordains preaching as the very means of calling his elect; at full strength the position is not that evangelization is pointless but that its saving effect is reserved to those God has chosen.

Let it stand at full strength. Then press the canon with the next question.

9. Now test it. Read Exodus 8:15 and 8:32 alongside 4:21; read 1 Timothy 2:4; and look at how Jesus himself quotes Isaiah 6 in Matthew 13:13. What do you find?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Three findings. First, in the Exodus narrative Pharaoh hardens *his own* heart through the early plagues (8:15, 32) before the text says God hardened it; the divine hardening, on the Church's long reading of the whole sequence, confirms a refusal already freely made. It is judicial: God gives the persistently unwilling what they insist on. The Fathers loved an image for this: the same sun that melts wax hardens clay; the difference is not in the sun.

Second, 1 Timothy 2:4: God *“desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”* Any reading of Isaiah 6 that makes God the author of unbelief collides with God's stated will for every soul. The Church teaches that God predestines no one to hell (CCC 1037), is never the author of moral evil (CCC 311), and includes each person's free response within his eternal plan (CCC 600): he permits refusal because love cannot be compelled, and he weaves even refusal into his plan.

Third, watch Jesus' own citation: Matthew 13:13 quietly shifts the wording, *“because seeing they do not see.”* Not so that: *because.* Jesus reads Isaiah's purpose-grammar as prophetic irony describing the result of a freely refused word. The hardening of Isaiah 6 is real, and it is a judgment; but it falls on those who first stopped their own ears. The message for us is not *some cannot believe* but *do not practice refusing, because refusal hardens.* And even here Isaiah's oracle ends with a seed in a

stump; God's judgments carry mercy inside them.

10. Read verse 13 to the very last line. After total devastation, ten percent remains, and that remnant is burned again. What is the final phrase? Say it and stop.

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

"The holy seed is its stump." A forest felled, the stump burned, and inside the dead-looking stump: a holy seed. That is the whole future of God's people in five words, and Isaiah leaves it there without explanation. So will we. Mark the phrase in your Bible and keep your eye on stumps. Say no more than that.

11. (Optional, first cut for time.) Read Revelation 4:8 and John 12:39-41. What does John dare to say about *whose* glory Isaiah saw on the throne?

ANSWER (share after the discussion)

Actually keep the John 12 half even if you cut Revelation. John, after quoting Isaiah 6, writes: *"Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him,"* and in John's Gospel the *him* is Jesus. John is claiming that the King on the throne, high and lifted up, whom Isaiah saw in the year Uzziah died, is Christ. And John has been telling us all along that the Son of Man must be *lifted up* (John 3:14; 12:32), meaning the cross. The throne Isaiah saw, high and lifted up, and the cross outside Jerusalem are, for John, one enthronement. The Catechism names Isaiah 6-12 the Book of Emmanuel (CCC 712).

Revelation 4:8 adds the timeline: the living creatures *"never cease to sing, 'Holy, holy, holy.'"* Never cease. The hymn Isaiah heard in 740 BC is still in progress, and the Sanctus is where you step into it.

SEND • TAKING IT OUT

1. The order of Isaiah 6 is vision, honesty, cleansing, then availability. Most of us try to skip straight to figuring out our mission. Which step are you actually on, and what would it take to stop skipping?
2. *"Here am I! Send me"* was said before Isaiah knew the assignment, and the assignment turned out to be hard. Is there an area of your life where you have been waiting to see the details before saying yes to God? What would an *available before informed* yes look like this month?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- At Mass this Sunday, when the Sanctus begins, remember where you are standing: mid-verse in the seraphim's unending hymn. Sing it like Isaiah 6 is true, because it is.
- Bring one honest *woe is me* to prayer, or better, to Confession, and let the cleansing come from Christ's absolution rather than from self-improvement.
- Once this week, pray Isaiah's answer as your morning offering: *Here am I, send me*. No conditions attached. See what God does with an available person.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

“And 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.”

Isaiah 6:8 (RSV2CE)

Closing Prayer

Holy, holy, holy Lord, we have seen tonight that your altar heals the honest and resists the proud. Touch what is unclean in us with fire from your altar. Take away our guilt in the sacrament you have provided. And then, Lord, ask your question within our hearing, and give us the recklessness of the prophet: here we are. Send us.

Through Christ our Lord, whom Isaiah saw in glory. Amen.

Before next session: read Isaiah 7:1-17 and 9:1-7. Bring your Christmas associations; we are going to test them against the text.

Leader Reference Card

Every passage used tonight, in order

Primary Text

- Isaiah 6:1-4 (throne, robe, seraphim, the thrice-holy)
- Isaiah 6:5 (woe is me; unclean lips)
- Isaiah 6:6-7 (the coal from the altar; guilt taken away)
- Isaiah 6:8 (whom shall I send; here am I)
- Isaiah 6:9-10 (the hardening commission)
- Isaiah 6:11-13 (how long; devastation; the holy seed is its stump)

Live Discovery Targets

- 2 Chronicles 26:16-21 (Uzziah's presumption, leprosy at the altar of incense)
- John 12:39-41 (Isaiah saw his glory; accept 12:37-43)

Supporting Passages

- Luke 5:8 (Peter: depart from me; pairs with 6:5 via CCC 208)
- Exodus 19:16-19; 33:20 (Sinai glory; none may see God and live)
- Leviticus 16:12 (coals from the altar; Day of Atonement background)
- Exodus 4:21; 8:15, 32; Romans 9:18; 1 Timothy 2:4; Matthew 13:13 (steelman texts)
- John 3:14; 12:32 (lifted up: throne and cross)
- Revelation 4:8 (the hymn never ceases; optional)

Catechism

- CCC 208 (Isaiah 6:5 and Luke 5:8: the cry of the creature before the Holy One)
- CCC 1352 (the Sanctus: joining the unending praise)
- CCC 1137-1139 (earthly liturgy participates in the heavenly)
- CCC 311, 600, 1037 (God never the author of evil; freedom within the plan; no one predestined to hell)
- CCC 712 (the Book of Emmanuel)

Memory Verse

- Isaiah 6:8 (RSV2CE)