My message this morning is about turning points. By turning point, I mean something that happens that marks a dramatic change in our world. All of us have experienced turning points at some point or other in our lives.

- One important turning point for me was when I met my wife while going to school in Kansas. That changed the trajectory of my life—in a good way, of course.
- Another turning point was the day I decided to accept a job in Washington DC with the federal government. That turned into a 23 year long career that also changed my life—mostly for the good, but like any job, some days that were better than others.

Most of us have experienced major turning points like these in our personal lives. Whether it’s meeting someone extra special, making a career-changing decision, or something else that makes a big change in our lives, we all have personal turning points that lead to change.

Nations experience turning points too. In our own history we can point to several that occurred within the lifetimes of many of us here today:

- It was the year the twin towers fell (2001)…and suddenly our world changed; we had to defend against terrorist attacks and became more concerned about security; the way we traveled changed dramatically.
- It was the year President Kennedy was assassinated (1963)…the year the hopes and dreams the nation had for the young President came crashing down; at the same time, social changes ushered in a period of change and uncertainty.
- It was the year Pearl Harbor was attacked (1941)…the United States was plunged into a global war; millions of people served in the greatest war the world had ever seen; and many people became fearful of the future.

All of these are recognizable turning points in our nation’s history.
In their own ways, they ushered in a period of significant danger and uncertainty.

From our reading this morning, we hear about another turning point—this one in the life of the Kingdom of Judah.

**It was the year that King Uzziah died…**

We don’t know a whole lot about King Uzziah but we do know this:

- He was the king of Judah for a long time—around 50 years.
- His reign was marked by relative peace and stability.
- He built up the kingdom, especially the farming towns and the army.

By the time he died, his kingdom was in pretty good shape.

But when he died, a new superpower was rising in the Middle East—the kingdom of Assyria.

The year that King Uzziah died was a turning point because after this, Judah began a gradual slide from being a stable, independent kingdom to no kingdom at all.

It's Kings were weaker, didn't reign as long and they made some bad decisions that took them into conflict with their neighbors.

So it was the year that King Uzziah died—at this turning point—that God appeared to a man named Isaiah.

Isaiah’s encounter with the Divine is at once wondrous and filled with awe; it’s mysterious and dangerous.

It took place in the Temple in Jerusalem; the Temple, the space where God was worshipped:

- Isaiah saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty.
- The vision was so immense that the hem of his robe filled the temple.
- Seraphs (divine beings) were in attendance above him; they covered their eyes and their feet because of the holiness of God.
- They called back and forth to each other worshipping and praising God with these words: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the
whole earth is full of his glory.” Their voices shook the very foundations of the building.
The throne room filled with smoke to cover the pure holiness of God.
(We ought to think about this picture in the context of our worship. Now I’m not saying we should have smoke in the sanctuary—unless the praise band wants a smoke machine to liven things up! We need to remember God is present with us in this place every Sunday. We may not see the hem of His robe, but God is present in this place. And as we worship God here, God is being worshipped in the heavenly realms, in the heavenly throne room. The whole host of heaven—angels and divine beings—and all the saints that have gone before us, bow down and worship the God who is King. Our worship on earth is connected to the worship of God in heaven. Our worship matters to God).
It’s in this moment of divine revelation, Isaiah feels his insignificance before the Creator God.
Realizing his trouble, Isaiah confesses 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!”
But in this moment that should bring his death—for no one, we are told, can gaze upon the Holy One and live—there is a moment of grace.
A seraph touches Isaiah’s lips with a burning coal and takes away his sin.
In this moment of divine grace, it turns out the fire of the Holy One is not for destruction but for purification.
This is grace, pure and simple.
The kind of grace we will see again, poured out for us in the Incarnation—in the life of Jesus.
For Isaiah, God’s presence does not destroy. It cleanses him—making him pure; it liberates him from his fears; and it commissions him to speak for God.¹

That message was a tough one to deliver.

This is the reason why no one answers a want ad for prophet—the message is almost never one people want to hear. In Isaiah’s time…

Go and say to this people: Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.
Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes…
Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:
Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people and the land is utterly desolate; until the Lord sends everyone far away, and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.
Nothing would be left but a stump like a tree.
And yet, there was still hope.
A point of grace.
For a holy seed would remain.
New life was still possible.

The message of the prophets is seldom to ears that do not want to hear.

And in our time…

- Our earth is warming. Globally, temperatures have been rising at an unusual rate for the past 50 years. The oceans are getting warmer, the ice caps are melting, sea levels are rising. By the end of this century, the waters may rise enough to put some island countries in the Pacific and many coastal areas around the world under several inches of water. Scientists are 95% certain that human activity is contributing to the rapid rise in temperatures.

Will we have ears to hear, and minds to comprehend?

Can we learn to be good stewards of God’s good Creation once again?

There is always hope.
There is hope because of the most important turning point in human history. That turning point took place when God sent His Son to earth, to take on human form—incarnated, we call it—God made flesh. That turning point showed us what it means to live a life dedicated to God. It also showed us the cost of God’s grace. The one man died so that men and women throughout the ages might live.

Most of us will never be asked to deliver the likes of the message Isaiah was asked to give to Judah. Most of us will never “hear” the voice of God in the sense of an audible voice.

God does not speak to us in that way most of the time. But God does speak to us in the experiences we have, in encounters with other people and through our reading of God’s Word—the Bible. Sometimes, God even speaks to us in the silence.

But however we hear God’s voice speaking into our lives, we need to answer.

Like Isaiah, we can see ourselves as small, of no account, and inadequate to the task God calls us to.

If it was up to us, we’d say we can’t make a difference.

But we need to know that God can make a difference through us.

Remember this: you may be the only Gospel somebody else meets. You may be the only scripture, the only sermon that someone who does not know Christ will encounter.

If we’re willing, we might be the turning point God uses to bring about a change for the good in their life.

Let us be the embodiment of that love—of God’s grace—for our neighbors and our community. Amen.