



Seventh & James Baptist Church

Sermon Transcript from May 27, 2018

Peekaboo
Isaiah 6:1-8

Peekaboo! It's one of the early games we play with little babies and it usually brings about squeals of delight and lots of giggles. It works because of what we call object permanence. That's the idea that objects continue to exist even when they are out of our sight or touch or taste or hearing. There is some debate about when we develop this understanding, but it happens fairly early in our lives, which kind of ruins the excitement of peekaboo. The game of covering your baby's eyes and then uncovering them and saying peekaboo works so well because they haven't yet fully developed object permanence. When they can't see you, you no longer exist. Then when you pop back into their lives...it's like a miracle to them. That's why they can get so terribly sad when you just walk behind them a few feet—they think you're actually gone unless they can hear you. We develop object permanence as early as three months old or as late as two years old depending on who's theory and research you read. The point is that by the time we're adults, we're supposed to have it well established in our minds and in our hearts that objects continue to exist even when we can no longer see them or hear them or touch them or taste them.

If that's true...if we've all got this understanding firmly developed in our brains, then why are we still so engaged in our global games of peekaboo? There was a terrible hip hop song in the early 2000's by Shaggy titled "It Wasn't Me" where he sings about his girl catching him with another girl. The song begins with Shaggy and a buddy talking about his dilemma and his friend's advice is to just say that it wasn't him. She came into his house and caught him with another woman and all through the chorus he just keeps saying, "It wasn't me," as if he says it enough times he might convince them both. I feel like we're living this ridiculous song these days. So many times our public figures make mistakes and their first instinct is to lie and say "It wasn't me." "I didn't do that...yeah, but we've got lots of evidence pointing to the fact that you actually did..." "Nope, that must be fake news...wasn't me...must have been someone else." "Right...but we have you on camera saying this very thing...yeah no, I didn't say that." "Okay...I'm going to have to ask you to

watch this video of you saying these very words that you are now claiming you didn't say..."
"Look, I don't know where you got that tape, but I didn't say those words...wasn't me."

But before we get too judgey about whomever popped into our minds while I was saying that, whether a politician or a movie star or a corporate executive or someone else in the spotlight, I'm afraid we do it too. Perhaps not to the same degree, but we as a people seem to take up and lay down object permanence as it suits the narrative we want to create and the scenarios we want to play out so we can sleep well at night. What do I mean? When I am looking for a new shirt or a new tie or if we really want to get serious, a new pair of socks...I have an uncanny ability to detach myself from the drawer full of socks I already own. I can't see them from the store, and therefore they must not exist, so I definitely need this new pair.

But it's more insidious than that...I can also forget object permanence when I'm making choices about how I spend money, not just on socks but on more significant purchases...I can completely block out the fact that there are homeless children in Waco who desperately need uniforms for school. If they were standing with me in front of the sock display, would that change my mind about how I spend those \$10-\$12? I know it would, but somehow, I manage to cover my eyes and then convince myself that since I can't see them, they don't exist. Peekaboo!

I don't think I'm alone in this voluntary object permanence.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, we have the scene of Isaiah's encounter with God. He experiences God's holiness, he witnesses the majesty and might of God's presence and immediately he cries out for himself, "Woe is me! I am lost! For I am a man of unclean lips...yet my eyes have seen the King! The Lord of Hosts!" God's holiness comes in stark contrast to our own sinfulness and Isaiah knows he has no standing in the throne room of God. He knows he is not just lost—he is about to be unmade by the fact that his sin makes him ineligible to be here—he's standing on holy ground, but he's not holy. All my life, I was told this was the beginning of understanding the Gospel. We encounter Holy God and recognize our own sin and depravity and we come to know that we are a goner. We are lost. Woe is us because we are a person of unclean lips yet we are in the presence of the King, the Lord of Hosts! This sets the stage for the Good News of Jesus who makes me holy through his own life, death and resurrection. Washed in the blood of the lamb, I can now

stand in the presence of the King without being afraid for my own existence. My sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west and I am made clean through Jesus.

We never talked about the part of Isaiah's lament that I didn't read. Isaiah recognizes his own sin and the negative effect it has on his standing before God—I am a man of unclean lips...but we never talked about what it meant to live among a people of unclean lips and to include that in your confession. I assumed it was part of being in a sinful world and that my job was to help everyone have their own Isaiah encounter with God and then the world would be a little less sinful.

I never considered that it was part of Isaiah's confession to God. I just thought it was a fact, perhaps helping to explain why his own lips are unclean—after all he lives in an unclean world and some of that grime was bound to wear off on him. Not that he's not responsible for his own sin, he's just putting his confession in context. But what if Isaiah is feeling just as guilty about the unclean lips of his people as he is about his own unclean lips? Why should he? He didn't do the things they are guilty of doing. Sure, he had his own problems, but he didn't do all of the things THEY did. No one ever told me about corporate sin until I went to seminary. And it was a hard concept to accept.

We started with racism.

I knew racism was a problem, but it was my great-grandparents problem...they were the ones who lived in a racist time...oh sure, I was surprised to find out my own mom and dad went to a segregated high school, but as far as I knew that wasn't their fault...it's just the way things were back then. And yeah, I grew up in a mostly segregated town, but I went to three different elementary schools so that we could all go to fourth grade in the Hispanic school, fifth grade in the Anglo school, and sixth grade in the African American school. But then we were all together in Jr. High and High School. I wasn't really racist. I understood my own unclean lips from some of the jokes I'd laughed at and then repeated, or for some of the words I'd used to describe people, but I didn't create the system...I didn't personally oppress anyone as far as I knew...I could confess that I lived among a people whose lips were unclean, but that wasn't my fault, it was just a fact.

In 1982, seven people in Chicago died and their common denominator was taking Tylenol just hours before their death. It was discovered that their Tylenol capsules had been laced with Potassium Cyanide in lethal doses. Johnson & Johnson, the company who

produces Tylenol, immediately halted production of the product and issued a nationwide recall of all 31 million Tylenol products that were in circulation. The company also advertised across the nation warning consumers not to take any Tylenol acetaminophen products as these were linked to the deaths of the people in the Chicago area. They knew when they issued the recall and launched the advertising campaign that this was not a factory problem. There was no evidence suggesting this occurred before the Tylenol capsules left the various production places or even during distribution. The bottles in question all came from different sources and it was a clear case of tampering and someone taking bottles from pharmacies and lacing the capsules with the potassium cyanide and then returning them to the pharmacies where unsuspecting consumers bought them and ingested them.

Tylenol was in no way at fault, but they acted as if they were. They didn't say, "Our factories are clean, our production lines are flawless, this is just a case of a bad person who happened to use our products as a means of his or her evil ends. They replaced, free of charge, any existing capsules with solid tablets and began to implement tamper-proof packaging on all of their products before they restarted manufacturing. The company's market share collapsed from 35% to 8% of the market during this recall and ad campaign. But it is widely regarded as the gold standard for a company's response to a crisis. They took responsibility for something they didn't do. They bore the burden of someone else's bad actions, not because they had to, but because they chose to. And I keep wondering, when am I going to be as good a Christian as Johnson & Johnson?

When Isaiah confesses the unclean lips of his people, I don't think he's just telling God that he lives with a bunch of hooligans, I think he's confessing to corporate sin. I think he's owning up to the fact that living among a people with unclean lips is a part of his story.

It's a part of his life.

It's a part of his own sin problem.

Wait, but he's not the one who was leading the government...he wasn't the one who scoffed at God's warnings about relying too heavily on the army of the Assyrians to do the work for the army of Israel. It wasn't him.

And yet, it was a part of his confession. Can it be a part of our own confession to include the sins of our society? Can we get to a place where we confess before God the

unclean lips of our people? We live in the wealthiest nation on the planet, but we still have people who sleep on the streets or in make-shift shelters. We still have children who die from malnutrition. We undertreat our mentally ill and overincarcerate drug addicts and people of color. Sexual abuse and harassment are just now coming to be unacceptable crimes in all instances, regardless of what a woman was wearing or where she was working. People of color are still getting arrested and in too many cases shot to death for the color of their skin and the suspicion that our racism associates with darker skin tones. Our lips are unclean, and until we are willing to own that living among a people with unclean lips is also a part of our confession, our problem, our responsibility, we're just playing peekaboo with our sisters and brothers. Pretending to see them only when we uncover our eyes and want to help or give or get to know. We're still playing peekaboo with God, pretending that if we can't see it, if we don't encounter any sexism or racism or ageism or oppression or food insecurity, then it doesn't exist between us and God. It's not a part of our need for Grace.

To what end did Isaiah confess his corporate sin to God? Why does it matter if we take ownership of our societal sin? Won't it be good enough for us to just go out and fight it? Isn't it enough for us to march and organize and work and fight and holler at the ones who should be fixing it. If we confess it as a part of our own sin, then we're complicit in it...we're a part of the problem.

Yeah, I think that's the point.

Isaiah didn't go to his people with crystal clean lips to tell them that they were dirty. He went to them with the scars of his own sin, burned around his own lips and he said, "We've got a problem, and we need to fix it." And that is such a different kind of prophetic message than when we say, "You've got a problem and you need to fix it." I think it begins in our confession. I believe that when we put ourselves in the same lot as our people, our message of Grace is a lot more invitational and a lot less judgmental. I suspect Isaiah had an understanding in his eye, a compassion in his heart, a love for his sisters and brothers to whom God was speaking that he would not have had if he had not owned up to being a part of the sin of his society, the transgression of his community. We've got to stop playing peekaboo with God and with our neighbor, and start by confessing our sin to God...all of

it...and then feel the cleansing burn of the coal of grace, touching our lips and sending us out to be with our neighbors. Amen.