

Two Kinds of Burnout

Isaiah 6:1-8

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

May 30, 2021/Trinity Sunday

For those who are in the building, welcome back (again) to in-person worship! For those watching online, a warm welcome to you, too.

It's been an up and down and open and closed past year or so. I feel like something of a broken record when I say that I very much hope that this latest reopening can be the beginning of a move toward more normal worship gatherings as we head into summer and fall.

On Wednesday afternoon, I participated in a pastors' gathering online where there was space created for people to talk about how they were doing.

I've been a part of a few of these gatherings throughout the last fourteen months or so. The responses to the "how are you doing" question tend to follow some familiar patterns.

Many initially don't know quite what to say. *How am I doing? Well, who can say during a year as strange as this past one? Not terrible, necessarily, but not exactly thriving either.* There is often uncertainty, anxiety, generalized fatigue, weariness of the COVID wars that are dividing families and friends and sometimes churches.

One pastor this week settled on a word that many resonated with: "languishing." A few others went a step further and used the dreaded word "burnout." Afraid of it... On the verge of it... in the midst of it... whatever.

None of this is unique to pastors, I should hasten to add. I think pastors have probably had some unique challenges over the past year, but I suspect there would be few among us who wouldn't resonate with at least some of the descriptions above.

On Thursday morning, I read an article in *The New Yorker* called, "Burnout: Modern Affliction or Human Condition."¹

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/05/24/burnout-modern-affliction-or-human-condition>

Apparently, three out of five workers in America claim to be burned out or on the verge of it. Well over half!

I'm always a little suspicious of surveys that rely on self-analysis and reporting—we're not always the most reliable or objective judges of ourselves!

And there can be a weird kind of status associated with the word "burnout." *What can my looming burnout mean but that I work terribly hard, that I am vitally important, and that the world would spin off its axis were it not for my heroic efforts in the world!*

But still, three out of five! That's a sobering statistic.

And there's more than one kind of burnout, obviously. There's the familiar burnout that is associated with overwork or futile work or stressful work.

But we also hear talk of digital burnout, social media burnout, parenting burnout, marriage burnout, church burnout. And of course, pandemic burnout.

According to the article, "the defining symptoms of burnout are exhaustion, cynicism, and loss of efficacy." Anyone notice any of those in their own lives over the last year and a bit?!

Well, thus far the article on burnout represented what you would expect from a publication like *The New Yorker*. Plenty of more or less accurate diagnosis, not much cure.

But then, the article took a turn I didn't see coming. It went to church. Sort of. The writer, Jill Lepore, pondered the connection between modern burnout and declining church membership.

In 1985, 71% of Americans belonged to a house of worship. This number had remained more or less static since the 1940s.

Thirty-five years later, in 2020, that number had plummeted. Only 47% of Americans now say they belong to an institution of faith. I suspect the numbers would be roughly the same in Canada. If anything, they might be lower.

This is an incredible cultural shift that has taken place even within my own lifetime! Could it be that our flight from church is contributing to the prominence of burnout?

The article hastily adds that religious people seem to burn out at a comparable rate to non-religious people. Which is manifestly true. Religion is no foolproof antidote to burnout.

At least not the way we often *do* religion in our culture. We so easily turn church into one more path of achievement, of scoring points with God and each other.

We embrace metrics from the business world to measure our progress, we reduce church to building an institution or maintaining a social club, or to cheesy marketing campaigns, or to enhancing our reputation in the community, or to any number of other things.

The article in *The New Yorker* located the problem with burnout in decreasing levels of human connection and institutional belonging that we once got from church. This is all true and well and good as far as it goes.

But I don't think it goes nearly far enough. I think the story of Isaiah might help us go further.

There are a couple of ways of reading our passage from Isaiah this morning. On one level, it is the story of a specific person and a specific story at a specific time and place.

It is the story Isaiah, son of Amoz who lived roughly seven centuries before Christ. It is the story of his call and commission to be a prophet of Yahweh to the stubborn and idolatrous people of Judah.

But I think the story is more than just a record of what happened once upon a time. Like so many stories in Scripture, it is also *our* story. Or at least it can be. And, I think, should be.

What do I mean by this? I don't mean that we are all called to be prophets. I don't mean that we should all expect to have angelic visions. These things were unique to Isaiah's specific story and specific call.

But the *movement* within the story is one that I think serves as a pattern for all people at all times.

It begins with an encounter of the radical otherness of God—God's transcendent holiness. *In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord...*

You can almost hear Isaiah gasp at this point. *I saw the Lord! High and exalted, above all that is, above all that was, above all that ever will be.*

And then, the words of the angels: "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." The foundation of the temple shakes and is filled with smoke.

It is a vision of the holiness and transcendence of God.

We so often call Jesus our friend and our brother. We address God in familiar terms in prayer. All of this is good and proper. One of the deep mysteries of Christian faith is that the God of the universe has come near and made himself accessible in the ordinary, the mundane, the everyday, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

But alongside this vital and hope-filled truth we must hold *another* vital and hope-filled truth. God is other. God is holy.

God is pure and piercing love. God is righteous justice and truth. God is the creator and sustainer of all that is. God is far beyond any of our categories, far beyond our comprehension.

This leads to Isaiah's famous declaration of woe. *I am ruined. I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.*

Compared to this vision of God's holiness, Isaiah realizes that he is a sinful man who lives among a sinful people who fall so far short of God's intentions for the world and for humanity.

This, too, is our story as human beings. At some point in our lives, I think we all come to terms with the three f's of the human condition. We are fragile, finite and fallen.

We don't do the good that we long to do; we do the bad that we long not to do (Rom. 7). Our good intentions fall short. We tire. We run out of good ideas. We languish.

This is not about obsessing over our sinfulness and delighting in pointing it out in the lives of others. This has been done far too often and too enthusiastically in some corners of the Christian world.

But an honest assessment of who we are in light of who God is yields an inescapable conclusion: We do not always live lives that are gloriously alive to God and to our neighbour. We do not love as we ought to. We fall short. We miss the mark.

In the story of Isaiah, "woe is me" is followed by another, different kind of encounter with God. The angel takes a flaming coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's lips. The same lips that had just proclaimed woe are now purified by the refining fire of God.

Your guilt is taken away. Your sin is atoned for.

Some of us struggle with the language of atonement. We bristle at the idea of something in us that requires this or that anyone ought to be able to demand it on our behalf.

At the risk of repeating myself, for any who think atonement is some kind of relic from more primitive times, I simply invite you to visit the Internet or read a newspaper. We are a culture that demands near constant atonement for an endless list of (highly selective) sins, most involving sins connected race, gender, sexuality, etc.

At any rate, Isaiah's guilt and his sin is burned away by the love, the mercy, the forgiveness of God.

This is a different kind of burnout. This is not the burnout of human limitation, weakness, frailty, and misdirected action. This is God burning away human sin with a refining and purifying fire. This is God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

And then, only *after* this movement from encounter to awareness to confession to forgiveness and absolution, comes Isaiah's commission.

Who will go for us, the Lord asks?

(Incidentally, that plural word—"us"—is why this passage is read on Trinity Sunday. Many see in this passage an early hint that God is a divine community of love. It is only a hint, but a suggestive one, nonetheless).

Here am I, Isaiah famously says. *Send me*. How many people throughout history, have located their own calls and responses in these words? *I feel inadequate, but I am willing. I have seen the Lord and even though I don't know what the future holds, I am willing to go where God leads.*

Well, let's see if we can land this plane and make some connections here.

What does Isaiah's vision have to do with burnout culture? How does this ancient encounter with God connect to our context today, particularly after a year like the one we have endured?

This is where I think that the article in *The New Yorker* stopped too soon. The antidote to burnout is certainly connected to community and relational connection.

But I think it is also *profoundly* connected to the need to worship that is hard-wired into our DNA.

The late novelist David Foster Wallace, who wrote the massive *Infinite Jest*, famously said that “there is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”

A culture that reduces this need to therapy or self-help or wellness techniques or anything that *we* are responsible for doing on our own will always be a culture that is on the verge of burnout, in my view.

What we need is not more to do. We already get that literally everywhere else in our lives, whether it’s our workplaces or the punishing demands to present a certain image on social media, or to align ourselves with the right positions on the right issues to the right crowds, or any of the other areas of our lives where we are constantly exhorted to work harder, be better.

What we need is to tell the truth about who we are and to encounter the God who loves us precisely for who we are.

This is one of the reasons I think burnout has exploded since our culture has more or less stopped going to church or have had our worship reduced to the flatness of individual experiences on screens.

(I say this fully acknowledging that online worship has been a lifeline for many during this pandemic! I think we can say that being able to worship online has been good and necessary even as we acknowledge that it cannot fully replace embodied worship, presence, singing together, etc.)

It’s not that I think that church is perfect or that we don’t fall prey to many of the same temptations out there in the world. God knows we can and we do.

But regular worship keeps us tethered to important truths about who we are, how we’re wired, what we need, and most importantly, who God is.

This rhythm we see in Isaiah is reproduced in Christian worship every Sunday, at least it can be and should be.

We encounter the holiness of God. We are brought to awe, to reverence.

This produces an awareness of human frailty, sin, limitation Which leads to confession, honestly, telling the truth about who we are.

Confession leads to absolution. We hear that we are forgiven. That our sin is remembered no more, is cast as far as the east is from the west.

And then we are commissioned to go out into the world to love God and neighbour, to proclaim the good news of the gospel in word and in deed.

I believe that this structure of worship, this basic need is hardwired into each one of us.

And I believe the truths about God and about us that are underneath these basic needs are the only reliable way to avoid burnout.

The antidote to burnout is not more or better techniques. It is the capacity to rest, secure in the knowledge that we are held by a love that refuses to let us go.

I want to end with a very simple challenge.

I spoke earlier about uncertainty about the future. Many pastors and church leaders are currently wondering what the next months will hold.

What will the church's post-pandemic future look like? How will this year affect our willingness to come together again? Will we be frightened? Will we stay away even when we are allowed to gather? Will we eat together? What will these months and months of isolation have done to us collectively?

Perhaps this could be a time for a very simple call—to our culture, to our neighbours, to you, to me.

Come back to church.

I'm not going to tell you when. Each person will have to make up their own minds on what they think is safe. Even though things feel hopeful on May 30, 2021, we know that things can change.

I'm not going to tell you where. I know there are a few people watching our weekly services during this pandemic who don't live in Lethbridge but have connections to members of our congregation. Your "where" will be different in your own context.

But I will tell you why. Or why not.

Not because the bottom line is hurting. Not because pastors need to get paid. Not because programs will die or won't be restarted if we don't come back. Not because relationships need to be reinvigorated and strengthened. Not because there are all kinds of things out there in the community that the church needs to get busy addressing.

All these things may be—almost certainly *are*—true to varying degrees in various contexts.

But above and beyond all these things, I believe that the rhythm of Christian worship corresponds to who we are created to be and what we need to thrive as human beings.

We are not doing well as a culture without it. We can't bear the burdens of justifying ourselves, of doing enough, being enough. We are paralyzed by shame and beset by anxiety. We are depressed and addicted.

We scroll endlessly through the lives and experiences and attention-seeking of others as a way of distracting ourselves from all that seems uncertain and unsustainable in our world and in our lives. We don't know who we are or what we're for.

We need God. We need places to tell the truth. We need to confess our sins and to hear that we are forgiven. We need to hear that we have been gifted to participate in God's redemption of the world, in spite of it all.

We need to worship something bigger than ourselves. We need Someone who does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

It's that simple. If there's anything the last year has taught us, it is this.

So, hear the good news of the gospel. There is a shattering holiness that precedes us, stands over us, calls out to us, forgives us and sets us free, and sends us forth as witnesses to the hope of new life.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

