

The Feast of the Holy Trinity, Sunday, May 26, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

I Saw the Lord

Isaiah 6:1–8

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

From the first reading, Isaiah's relates how He saw the Lord sitting upon a throne: **And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."** (vv 1, 5–7)

INTRO: KING'S DEATH (v 1a)

It happened **in the year that King Uzziah died** (v 1), about 739 BC. That might not mean much to you, but it meant something to Isaiah the prophet. They'd had fifty-two years of peace and prosperity under King Uzziah. He was a good administrator and an able military leader. So his death meant political uncertainty and instability. At the same time, their greatest foreign threat, the kingdom of Assyria, was flexing more and more muscle in the north. You could hear the worry in people's voices. You could see the tension in their faces. The king—the one in whom they hoped and trusted—was dead. Now what?

Trust not in rulers; they are but mortal;
Earthborn they are and soon decay . . . (*LSB 797:2*)

Earthly rulers come and go, yes, and yet it feels like a big deal to those under their rule. For our part, we make much of the presidency. But acting like the next election could be the end of the world is making way too much of it. Christ's coming again, not the 2024 election, will be the end of the world. Until then, don't let the news and the anxiety own you. Live the life God has given you and do good where He has placed you.

Like you, Isaiah was in church. He went to the temple because he was a priest. He had a job to do in the sanctuary. He might've been thinking about the kingship as he went through his routines at work. That day, he saw way more than he expected. He says: **in the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne . . .** (v 1).

3. VISION OF THE THRICE-HOLY GOD (vv 2–4)

I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the hem of His robe filled the temple (v 1). One moment, Isaiah was participating in the regular temple liturgy—“Blessed are You, O Lord.” And the next moment the veil was pulled back. Time stood still and the walls exploded outward. He was staring into the Holies of Holies. Where the ark of the covenant should be, He saw an exalted throne. And on the throne? Not Uzziah or Jotham or Ahaz. Not a king of Assyria or an Egyptian pharaoh. On that heavenly throne, he saw the Lord God alone, the true king and ultimate ruler. He would never forget what he had seen.

Isaiah falls prostrate on the threshold. Can you imagine the terror he has in seeing what no man dares to see? Seeing God Himself. Sticking his head into the glory cloud, God’s shekinah presence. Trying to comprehend the mystery of the Holy Trinity. BOOM! What exactly does God look like seated there on the throne? **Such knowledge is too wonderful** (Ps 139:6)! Words fail. It’s too personal, too awesome, too all-encompassing to report. When we press Isaiah for more, he simply tells us how immense God’s robe is. Even the hem of God’s glory is more than we can handle.

But he does see more. He becomes conscious of other beings about the throne: **Above the Lord stood the seraphim. Each had six wings; with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:**

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!”

Those seraphim—fiery angels—standing guard around God’s throne. In response to His holiness, they’re all wings and voice, perfectly ready for praise and service. If only we were ready to praise and serve God like that! Yet notice also their humility. Even they hesitate to look directly into God’s face, for they cover their own faces, and they modestly hide their bodies with their wings. They know what is sacred and holy. It wills them with praise. But do we know what is sacred and holy? Why, we humans are so bold that we don’t even blink at seeing things that are shameful or at revealing our bodies to the eyes of the world.

It’s sensory overload for Isaiah. He sees the glorious throne. He hears the majestic singing—Holy, Holy, Holy!—echoing between the seraphim as they delight together in the glory of God. He feels the quake as he lies on the threshold. **And the foundations of the threshold shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke** (v 4). He smells the incense which hovers like a smoke cloud all around him.

For a moment, Isaiah has forgotten himself. He has seen the Holy, Holy, Holy One of Israel, the thrice holy. You can’t express it any stronger than that! God’s presence fills

the heavens and the earth. Who's really ruling? There's no question now. The Lord alone rules heaven and earth.

2. SELF-DESPAIR: WOE IS ME (v 5)

And that's when Isaiah becomes suddenly and brutally aware of himself. The majesty and holiness of God reveals just how unclean and unholy he truly is. There's nothing like being in the presence of God to help us know and see ourselves rightly. Isaiah now knows the truth about himself. He doesn't call down woe on others. He says: **"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I'm a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"** (v 5). It's not his smallness that crushes Isaiah; it's his uncleanness, and the uncleanness of his people, and the fact that he has seen the King. In the brightness, his own filth has become that much more obvious.

What, exactly, does Isaiah confess? He confesses an uncleanness of the lips. His lips don't belong to God. They don't continually pour forth praise like the seraphim. In this way, the lips are an expression of one's life. If the lips don't belong to God, it's because the heart and the will don't belong to Him either. That which God possesses is clean like him. But that which sin possesses is unclean. Sin stands condemned in the presence of God.

What is the uncleanness of our lips? What have we said? And not only said — what have we messaged, texted, and emailed? Have we let our emotions rule us? Have we let our feelings be our king? Have we enthroned them, rather than the Lord, in our hearts? Have we tried to exalt, defend, or justify ourselves with our words? Some of the greatest damage we can do is through our words — husbands to wives, wives to husbands, parents to children, children to parents, between sisters or brothers or friends or neighbors or coworkers. If you have a relationship that is strained, consider first what your lips have done. Woe is me!

1. CLEANSING AND SERVICE (vv 6–8)

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he'd taken with tongs from the altar (v 6). That must've been terrifying. Isaiah is so hopeless he doesn't even plead for mercy or make great vows to God. Here comes the servant of God. He has taken something from the altar — a holy fire. He flies straight for me, nearer and nearer. He presses it to my lips. Does it burn? But he says: **"Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away; and your sin atoned for"** (v 7).

GOD DOESN'T REVEAL HIMSELF TO DESTROY US
BUT TO REDEEM AND RULE US.

Your guilt is taken away; your sin atoned for. Here is the grace of God for sinners. Here is more than purification of the lips—it's purification of one's life. Yes, forgiveness is often a wrenching, searing, freeing experience, especially when God takes away the iniquity and sin in which we've lived for years. For if Isaiah, if we, are ever to serve God with clean lips, then He must also create in us clean hearts. By fire—the fire of God's own purity and love—the repentant are made like himself. Isaiah, your sins are forgiven. You have fellowship with the Holy God.

What was it about the burning coal that dealt with the condition of Isaiah's heart? What is it about bread and wine that touches our lips and does the same for us? It's not just the coal, the bread, the wine that does it but the words themselves: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words, along with the bodily eating and drinking, are the main thing in the Sacrament. Here we bow the knee and repent of our arrogance, our pride, our mistrust, and our anxiety. Here we veil our faces, cover our bodies, and sing with the seraphim: "Holy, holy, holy." Here the holy fire of Christ's body and blood, the Holy One of Israel, cleanses us of our sin.

And we hear also **the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"** And we, cleansed, forgiven, with nothing to hide, say, "Behold me, O Lord! **Here I am! Send me**" (v 8). We offer ourselves. Make us Your servants, O Lord. Use us, O King, in your kingdom. Let the vision that we've had of You here today make an impression on our lips, on our hearts, on our lives.

For you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9–10).

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7