

Isaiah 6:1-8
Romans 8:12-17

Second Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
June 11, 2023

Our Holy God

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today we hear the dramatic call of a flawed individual to be a prophet. The call comes from One who is declared to be holy. Listen to these words from Isaiah 6:1-8...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson today calls us to live according to the Spirit, not the flesh, which is self-serving and at enmity with God. To be led by the Spirit is to be a child of God. Listen to these words from Romans 8:12-17...

Sermon

Next to the Psalms, Isaiah is the Old Testament book quoted most often in the New Testament. The prophet Isaiah is recognized as one of the greatest theologians in the Old Testament. In the midst of a turbulent world, he set forth distinctive witness to the person and activity of God.

Of the man himself, we know that he is rather unique among the prophets in that he was a man of the city, rather than the country. Isaiah was born in the early part of the eighth century B.C. and grew up in the city of Jerusalem. He was a member of a family that was important in the king's court. He had free access to the kings of his state and he served as counselor to Hezekiah. When we deal with the Book of Isaiah, we are dealing with power and prominence. However, it is against his own wealthy compatriots that the prophet often levels the judgments of God.

Isaiah was born and grew to manhood during the reign of King Uzziah, who had a long and creditable kingship, ruling for approximately 40 years. He modernized the army, conquered the territory of Philistia, and extended commercial activities into Arabia. He brought peace and prosperity such as the nation had not known since the days of Solomon. And Isaiah reports that it was

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. (6:1)

In the year that King Uzziah died, Isaiah had his vision of the eternal King of Kings.

Seraphs [celestial beings of the highest rank] were in attendance above him, each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” The pivots on the threshold shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. (6:2-4)

Virtually every line of our lesson emphasizes that God is holy. And the prophetic account of standing in the wondrous presence of God describes what many have considered to be the heart of religious experience—an experience both mysterious and awesome.

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday, and we sang that familiar hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty,” which is derived in part from our scripture. It declares the majesty, the exaltation, the purity, and the mystery which belong to God alone. Holiness is that indescribable quality of sacredness that originates in God himself and differentiates God from us. The Israelites knew that God’s being, power, and majesty were beyond comprehension. But it is his very holiness that is the foundation for reverence and worship.

Now I think it’s important for us to recognize that we live in a culture that has made many people blind and deaf to the idea of a Holy God. The way God’s name is so often taken in vain reveals a lack of a sense of the holiness of God. Donald Gowan, Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Pittsburg Theological Seminary, says that most people don’t remember that popular

song of the fifties, “Won’t You Talk to the Man Upstairs.” But God seems to mean little more than that to many today—when people casually refer to Him as “The Man Upstairs.”

William Placher addresses this issue in his book, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about Transcendence Went Wrong*. We even see it on church signs with the message: “Let’s meet at my house before the game on Sunday.” Isaiah would not be comfortable with such chummy language about God. That’s why in our morning Worship Greeting I usually begin with a quote from scripture. Such as today’s from Habakkuk 2:20, “God is in his holy temple. Let all the earth be silent before him.” This is not a meeting of a civic club or a political party; we are here to worship the God of time and eternity, the God of all creation, who is also our refuge and strength—our Father in heaven. This God of the Bible is holy, sacred, other than all in this world.

However, this absolutely transcendent Lord enters into fellowship with a people whom he has expressly created for himself, for a purpose. We are joined in a covenant bond with the Holy Lord of hosts, who created the earth, the stars, and the planets. Joined to know God’s blessing and through us to enable all people to know God’s blessing.

And in this report of his call, Isaiah knows that this Power beyond all comprehension is also Moral Strength—unblemished Purity, Righteousness, and Justice. As we read in 5:16:

But the Lord of hosts is exalted by justice,
and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness.

And over against that purity revealed to his eyes, the prophet cries out this confession of sin:

“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!” (6:5)

As a young lad, Isaiah had been taught the difference between right and wrong. But he came to discover that many people were calling good, things he knew to be bad; and they were

calling bad, things he knew to be good. Isaiah watched princes make friends with robbers. He saw judges being bribed and letting criminals go free. He saw the haughty ladies of Jerusalem prance up and down the streets with bells jingling on their shoes, yet never a care for the sick or poor. He saw men in positions of power taking the best for themselves and leaving the worst for the poor and hungry.

Isaiah saw dead leaves fall from the tall oak trees, he watched uncared for gardens wither away. And he knew that the people of Israel had become like those dried-up leaves and that withered garden.

I reared children and brought them up [laments God in chapter 1 of Isaiah],
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib;
but Israel does not know, my people do not understand. (1:2b-3)

Our Epistle Lesson from Romans reminds us that if we live according to the flesh, we will die according to the flesh, but all who are led by the Spirit of God, are children of God. And if children of God, we will recognize the holiness of God, and be grateful for what he has done for us through his saving love in Christ Jesus, and for not leaving us alone, by sending the Holy Spirit.

But according to Isaiah, the primary sin is the sin of pride—the pride that makes us wise in our own eyes and shrewd in our own sight; the pride that causes us to reject the law of the Lord and to despise his Word and his Commandments, in the belief that they are just silly precepts for former times or are for someone else; the pride that believes we can save ourselves by the exercise of our own ingenuity; the pride that believes we can manipulate God by empty ritual, while reserving our true devotion for something else; the pride that thinks our achievements are solely of our own doing—like the king of Assyria who boasted,

“By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom,
for I have understanding.” (Isaiah 10:13)

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, which include envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth, pride is the first listed. Proverbs 16:18 tells us that pride goes before a fall. And according to the Old Testament, pride has always been our problem. As we find in the Genesis story of the Tower of Babel, where people said,

“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves.” (11:4)

But in verses 6 and 7 of this 6th chapter of Isaiah we find the forgiveness of God:

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.”

The Holy One of Israel is not only pure and righteous altogether; he is not only the Lord of all nations and the Judge of all the earth; but he is also that One who alone has the power to overcome sin, as we know through his Son Jesus Christ in his life and death, even death on a cross.

And through the experience of forgiveness, Isaiah is then able to answer the call of the Holy God:

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!” (6:8)

From a revelation of the mysterious, awesome, presence of God in all his holiness, to conviction and confession of sin, to reception of forgiveness, and finally to surrender to God’s call—this is the story of our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 6.

William Cowpers said in his hymn, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” his wonders to perform.” And so he does in transforming Isaiah to be born again to divine service, to be the voice of God’s judgment, and then the voice of God’s restoration. And so he does in a variety of transforming ways for people like you and me today. Let those who have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says, and answer the call of the Holy One to divine service.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.