

Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord

Isaiah 6:1-8

The prison warden was explaining to the man on death row that for his last meal he could have anything he wanted. *“Would you like lobster, we’ll get it for you. Filet mignon or Beef Wellington, it’s yours. Maybe even some caviar or shrimp cocktail, we’ll ship it in.”* “Nope,” replied the prisoner, *“I’ll just have a bowl of mushrooms.”* “Mushrooms?” said the warden. *“Why mushrooms?”* “Because,” said the condemned man, *“I’ve always been afraid to eat them.”*

Apparently the man’s fears were gone. Since he knew he was going to die anyway, he knew nothing could hurt him anymore. Unfortunately, it’s a rather drastic solution for removing your fears. Well, in our text for today we see a much better solution – God’s gracious, perfect solution for removing all our fears, as well as our sin and death too. And that perfect solution is none other than His pardon and forgiveness, which He spoke to Isaiah in our text. You see, our text is the account of the prophet Isaiah’s call into the ministry. And evidently Isaiah had many fears and doubts about that. He was filled with a deep sense of his own unworthiness to be God’s servant.

For that reason, Isaiah was given a vision of heaven. He saw God sitting on His throne, high and lifted up in all His majesty. And the train of His High-priestly robe filled the heavenly temple. Our text says that God was surrounded by His six-winged angels, the seraphim. Their name in Hebrew means: ‘burning flames,’ because they reflect the pure burning holiness of God. And indeed that was the theme of their song. They cried out: **“HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS THE LORD OF HOSTS!”** That three-fold holy is a Trinitarian invocation that speaks of the awesome holiness of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – 3 persons in 1 God.

As a matter of fact, that’s why the seraphim used two of their wings to veil their eyes and two of their wings to veil their feet. You see, in Scripture feet are often a symbol of uncleanness, because they touch the unclean dust of the earth. And so the seraphim hid their feet out of humility and reverence for God. Likewise, they veiled their eyes out of humility, for they dared not look at the face of the Most High and Holy One. This reminds us that even the good angels in all of their purity and

perfection are as nothing in comparison with the holiness and righteousness of God. Which is why the door-posts of the heavenly temple shook at the sound of their song and the whole place was filled with smoke – the traditional signs of God’s wrath and anger and judgment.

No wonder, then, that Isaiah was filled with fear. He had good reason to be afraid – afraid because of his own sinfulness, which is why he cried out: “WOE IS ME! FOR I AM LOST; FOR I AM A MAN OF UNCLEAR LIPS, AND I DWELL IN THE MIDST OF A PEOPLE OF UNCLEAR LIPS; FOR MY EYES HAVE SEEN THE KING, THE LORD OF HOSTS!” Isaiah knew that in his own sinful, corrupt human nature he could not see the Most Holy King, the Triune God, and live. That’s why he said: “I AM LOST!” Or as the Hebrew text literally puts it: “*I am dissolved, undone!*” It’s a verb that means: ‘to cease to exist.’ It’s the idea that if we remain in our sin we are utterly lost and done away with. We deserve to be wiped out by God’s wrath and anger. That is the penalty for our sin.

Now the particular sin that Isaiah was confessing was uncleanness of lips, which is an idiom for hypocritical living. God had accused His people of honoring Him with their lips, while their hearts were far from Him. You see, the people of Judah came to the temple faithfully – perhaps more faithfully than some of us. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with their sacrifices and offerings and worship, because their heart was not right. Perhaps some of them worshipped half-heartedly, expecting to get great things out of the worship, while putting relatively little into it. Instead of paying attention, when the Scripture Lessons were read or when they sang the Psalms, their minds would wander. To them the worship was bland and boring, when in reality, they were the ones who were bland and boring. There was very little excitement and fervor in the way they praised God!

There were also those who worshipped God only out of a sense of duty – to fill some imaginary quota of good deeds on their heavenly merit badge, all the while patting themselves on the back for being so virtuous and faithful. In the meantime, the desires of their heart were rotten to the core – full of selfishness and jealousy, dishonesty and revenge, lust and greed. In other words, they worshipped God with their lips. But their hearts were far from Him!

In fact, even their great leader, King Uzziah did that. It's no accident that Isaiah began his ministry in the year of Uzziah's death. That, too, was a statement of God's judgment. You see, King Uzziah, although he was a good and God-pleasing king, made a fatal mistake. Towards the end of his life, he thought that because he was so good he could do whatever he wanted. And one day, he entered the temple to burn incense before God, which forbidden to do, except for the priests. And though they pleaded with him to stop, he insisted on having his own way. As a result God struck him down with leprosy on the spot. And it was from that leprosy that he later died. So, he too worshipped God with his lips, but his heart was not right!

Can you see vestiges of that kind of behavior in your own life? You and I say one thing, but all too often we act just the opposite. Yes, we can talk a good game. We talk about love and forgiveness and compassion, but so many times we withhold it. We talk about the importance of the Word and the Sacraments, but so often make infrequent use of them. We talk about the need to preach the Gospel to every creature, but our meager offerings for missions and our half-hearted witness to others tell a different tale. Indeed, we too are a people of unclean lips. And the worst part is when we fail to admit it or try to cover it up with a show of pride.

For example, Ruth is a clerk at a large department store. One day a customer wrote a personal check for her purchase. So, Ruth asked her for some identification. After fumbling through her purse, the woman reluctantly presented Ruth with the only thing that bore both her name and address. It was a notice from her bank of insufficient funds in her checking account. Obviously, that woman did not want to admit that she was tapped out. She couldn't afford to pay for the purchase. Likewise you and I often avoid admitting our sins and faults to God. We don't like to confess that we are poor, miserable sinners, destitute of righteousness. But if in our stubborn pride we won't acknowledge the truth – that we are a people of unclean lips and lives – then we too will be ruined and undone, lost forever under God's wrath and condemnation.

However, the gracious good news of our text, is that when we do confess our sins like Isaiah did, God removes them just as surely and completely as He did for the prophet. We are told that one of the seraphim took a burning coal from the heavenly altar, touched it to

Isaiah's mouth and said: "BEHOLD, THIS HAS TOUCHED YOUR LIPS; YOUR GUILT IS TAKEN AWAY, AND YOUR SIN ATONED FOR!" The imagery here is taken from the Day of Atonement, when the High Priest would take a coal from the altar of incense and bring it into the Holy of Holies as part of the sacrifice to atone for the peoples' sin. Keep in mind, in Hebrew the word 'atone' means: 'to cover up and conceal.' And that points forward to the real Day of Atonement – the day when Jesus Christ, the Greatest High Priest of all, laid down His life on the altar of the cross to atone for the sin of the whole world. In so doing, He not only covered it up and concealed it, but abolished it forever!

In that one saving, forgiving moment Jesus did for us what the angel did for Isaiah in our text – He touched us with pardon and absolution for all our wrongs. He took away all our fears and sin and death, and set us free. In the words of our text, our guilt has been taken away. Or as the Hebrew text literally puts it: "*Our guilt has departed, never to return.*" In short, He removes the uncleanness of our lips and makes us holy in His sight. That's why this is such a perfect text for this Trinity Sunday. God the Father is the Pioneer and Author of our holiness, because He created us in His holy image to dwell with Him forever. God the Son, Jesus Christ is the Provider and Accomplisher of our holiness, because He shed His blood to wash away all our sin and iniquity, and gave us His righteousness to cover up all our guilt and shame. And God the Holy Spirit is the Protector Preserver of our holiness because He strengthens and keeps us in the faith, by distributing to us the gifts of forgiveness and salvation in the Means of Grace. That's what happens every time our lips read God's Word, and every time He touches our lips with His body and blood in the bread and wine for the remission of all our iniquities. That's why it's so crucial that we daily and weekly be in the Word and the Sacraments, for it is only through those Means of Grace that God cleanses our lips and our lives, so that we can be forgiven and free.

Perhaps you heard the story this past week from Bridgeport, Connecticut about the new Bride who saved a family from a house fire. Georgette Clemons had just left her wedding reception Sunday evening when she spotted smoke coming from a Bridgeport home. Georgette got out of the car she was riding in and ran into the home, still wearing her

wedding gown. As she made her way through the thick smoke, she heard a woman yelling about her animals. The woman didn't want to leave, so Georgette had to pull her out by hand. The firefighters soon arrived and battled the blaze after the members of the family were rescued. Meanwhile, Georgette was nearby folding her blackened wedding dress. *"I'm just glad that everyone was safe,"* she said.

Dear friends, two thousand years ago the Son of God walked directly into sin's deadly blaze and rescued us from the eternal fires of death and hell. He gave His life for us on the cross to make us His pure and holy, spotless bride, clothed in the Wedding Gown of His righteousness. That's the price He gladly paid to cleanse our lips and our lives. And the reason God cleanses our lips, is so that we can use our mouth to praise and glorify the Triune God and speak the Good News of Christ to others. So that like Isaiah we too will be able to boldly proclaim: "HERE AM I, SEND ME!" And that is what God longs to do – to send us out into a hurting dying world to bring the comfort and peace of the Gospel, to those in need. May He empower us by His Holy Spirit to do that more and more each day, for the glory of His holy name. Amen.