

Isaiah 6:1-8

“Holy, Holy, Holy ... and Holy”
Christmas 2

January 4, 2015

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
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Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God, our Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Amen! Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

[**Background**] In the year King Uzziah died, an amazing story happened! . . .
“Who was King Uzziah?” you ask.

Remember King Uzziah was the king of Judah,
and his reign tells us that the story is very real
—a real time and a real place in history.

The Kingdom of Israel had split into two kingdoms, the divided kingdom
—Judah in the south and Israel in the north—
at Solomon’s death, about ten centuries before Christ.

King Uzziah had reigned over the Southern Kingdom, Judah. And he was good!

And in the year he died, about seven-and-a-half centuries before Christ,
Isaiah, son of Amoz, one of the earliest prophets in that southern kingdom Judah,
had a vision. This is the amazing story (vv 1–2).

[**Vision**]

Isaiah sees himself in the temple.

But this is the heavenly temple, which formed the pattern for the earthly temple,
where the sacrifices were daily made for the people’s sin.

In heaven, Isaiah sees God surrounded by seraphim, one of the orders of angels,
beings created by God to serve him and mankind.

Isaiah describes them as having six wings,
two covering their faces, two covering their feet, and two for flying.

The seraphim begin singing to one another. Their song: “**Holy, holy, holy**” (v 3).

“**Holy, holy, holy**”

The threefold repetition announces the Trinity, three holy persons in one holy God.

Modeled on the Athanasian Creed, we can say, “**The Father is holy, the Son holy,
and the Holy Spirit holy; and yet they are not three holies, but one holy.**”

“**Holy, holy, holy**”

We call that song the Sanctus, and we sing it
with the angels, archangels, and all the company of heaven
when we come to Holy Communion.

Instead of taking us into heaven, God brings heaven down to us.
The common saying “Heaven is where Jesus is” holds true here,
since Jesus’ body and blood are on the altar.

Not only is God holy in heaven, but even earth experiences his glory.
And the repetition underscores God’s complete holiness, completely separated from sin.

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts”

The angels use God’s covenant name, Yahweh, in the phrase “LORD of hosts”
—that’s “Yahweh of hosts.”

The covenantal name reminds us that
we have a God who has made a covenant with the people of Israel
—and with us. He has a relationship with us.

[***Confession***] All this is just overwhelming for Isaiah! (vv 4–5).

When Isaiah sees God and the angels in his vision,
he recognizes that he himself is not holy, but “a man of unclean lips.”
He constantly lives among people in the same condition.

“Unclean” points out that Isaiah cannot fulfill the demands of God’s Law and is
“Unclean” in the ritual sense of ancient Israel.

A man of unclean lips cannot stand before God as the holy angels can.
The only appropriate response is ***“Woe is me! For I am lost.”***
The only appropriate response is ***“I a poor miserable sinner confess all my sins...”***

The people of the Old Testament knew this well,
marveling whenever one of them saw God and lived.
— Jacob wrestled with a man and later said, ***“I have seen God face to face,
and yet my life has been delivered”*** (Gen 32:30).
— Samson’s parents were terrified when they realized they had seen God
(Judges 13:22)
— Moses talked with God and when he came down the mountain the second
time, with the second tablets in his hands, his face glowed (Ex 34)

- Then Job replied to the LORD: *“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted. ... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you.”* (Job 42:1-2, 5)
- Even the seraphim cover their eyes before God. So Isaiah’s response is appropriate and correct.
- And Isaiah cries out, *“Woe is me!”*

[**Absolution**] What to do? The sinner is surely undone!
Then an angel brings a burning coal from the altar and places it on Isaiah’s lips (vv 6–7a).

The altar is the place where sacrifices for sin were made.
So the angel declares,

*“Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away,
and your sin atoned for.”*

The sacrifices made for sin on the altar are applied to Isaiah personally.

Both fire and water can be used for good or for ill, to keep alive or to kill.
We need fire to heat our homes, to cook our food, and to run our cars.
And yet fire out of control kills.
Similarly, we need water to stay alive;
we humans can live only three or four days without water.
But too much water in a flood kills and drowns.

God uses both fire and water to kill and to make alive.
In Baptism, God drowns the old man, killing our sinful nature.
At the same time, through the same water, he makes alive our new man,
giving us a righteous nature.

In calling Isaiah to be his prophet, God uses fire similarly:
with the fire, the burning coal,
God killed and destroyed the uncleanness in Isaiah (Is 6:6–7),
at the same time making alive the redeemed person,
making alive the man whose sins were atoned for.

This Isaiah vision is a model of Confession and Absolution.

In the same way as Isaiah exclaimed “Woe is me,” we confess our sins at the beginning of the Divine Service, for we deserve God’s punishment and not the chance to stand before him.

In the same way as the angel applied God's forgiveness to Isaiah, the pastor absolves the sinner, delivering to each sinner God's forgiveness won by Jesus Christ through his sacrificial suffering and death on the cross : "I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

After Confession and Absolution, the congregation is prepared to come before God.

Because each person bears the righteousness, the holiness of Christ,
he or she now can stand comfortably before the Holy Trinity
And that, ultimately, is why we *do* care about this story.

THE ONE GOD IS HOLY, HOLY, HOLY . . . AND HE MAKES US HOLY!

[**Result**] So now, finally, God can ask a question (v 8a).

Hear the Trinity again? "***Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?***"

God is both one ("I") and three ("us").

And the triune God—who in himself has all power and glory—
nevertheless asks his sinful servant to do an eternally important task.

Isaiah can now hear God's call and receive it.

Why? Because his sins have been atoned for.

Now forgiven, Isaiah hears God speaking, "***Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?***"

He receives the call and answers, "Here am I! Send me."

Isaiah can now represent God to the Israelite people as a prophet.

It's important to note that God took the initiative in asking Isaiah.

God called and Isaiah answered.

But having God's call did not make Isaiah's work easy.

In the next two verses following our reading,

the Lord would warn how hard the hearts of his people would be.

That is indeed what happened. Isaiah's message was largely ignored.

Yet he persevered almost sixty years, delivering God's message for him.

God continues to call people to his work.

In the present day, God continues to call pastors for his work.

In fact, God calls every Christian to live a life dedicated to him,
serving God in whatever capacity he has placed you or me.

Isaiah's call, your call, that is a story we care about deeply. Amen!

Now you are the body of Christ, each one of you part of it! Amen!