

Isaiah 6:1-8

May 21st and 22nd

“ 16 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

⁴ At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

⁵ “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.”

⁶ Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

Do you remember where you were and what you were doing at 12:30 PM on Friday, November 22, 1963? Whoops, I forgot only a few of us old guys who are 52 years or older were alive the day John F Kennedy was shot and killed. I was in Music Appreciation class at Northwestern College that fateful day. We were all shocked. We couldn't believe what was happening! What was happening in our country?

It was similar to a day Isaiah could remember, in the year Uzziah died, the king who had ruled Judah for 52 years, for it was in that year Isaiah received the vision that is our text this morning. His emotions, that awesome day, swung wildly as he was Standing in the Presence of the Holy God.

As has been mentioned a number of times this morning, this Sunday we are observing Trinity Sunday, a celebration of the Triune God. In God's threefold holiness, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, how could we, any better than Isaiah, Stand in the Presence of the Holy God?

It's always an appropriate question for us to ask. Since one day, if the Lord comes first, it would be Judgment Day, the end of the world. Or, it might be, for us individually, the day the Lord calls us home to heaven. Thinking of his holiness, contrasting it with our unholiness, how could any of us ever stand in his holy presence?

And so, looking again at how that question was answered for Isaiah, let's confidently see how we, too, can remain Standing in the Presence of the Holy God. For our comfort let's hear again the opening words of the Old Testament Lesson for this day from Isaiah 6.

“6 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another:

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I’m sure Isaiah remembered exactly where he stood, trembling that day. In a heavenly vision, this earth-bound mortal saw the Lord, seated on his throne, high and lifted higher. His train filled the temple, in other words, there was no place that escaped his all surpassing glory. And all around him, a further taste of his glory, were six winged seraphs.

Even these sinless creatures, the angels, confirmed in their holiness forever, were awe-struck in the Lord’s holy presence. With two of their wings they shielded their faces from the radiance of his glory. Two other wings covered their feet, another indication of their abject humility in the presence of the Holy One. And yet, with the other two wings, as they flew about, though their faces and feet were covered, their voices were not muted. One to the other they cried out mightily, they sang, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord Almighty. No place on earth escapes the brilliance of his glory.”

If the angels were awestruck by the holy appearance of God, Isaiah more so. Why the door sill was even trembling, or was it just the prophet’s knees shaking? The throne room was filled with smoke, as God, graciously, shielded his awesome presence from this trembling mortal. “Woe to me, the trembling prophet exclaimed. I’m ruined! For I am a sinner, a man with unclean lips. No mortal can save me for I live and breathe among a people also with unclean lips. And here I am standing in the presence of the Holy God, the King, the Lord Almighty.”

And, just like Isaiah, we live in the midst of a people of unclean lips. Every day we hear people using their tongues to mock God, using God's names in vain. And we may be silent, saying nothing in reply. Or we hear people, with their tongues, causing other people to feel utterly worthless and again we may say nothing in their defense. With evidence, just from the use of our tongues, easy to gather against us, proving we are not perfect, not perfectly holy, how could we ever remain standing in the presence of the Holy God?

The plain and simple truth is, as we are by nature, we could never stand in the presence of the Holy God. We've looked at just one aspect of our unholiness, the abusive ways we use our tongues. It's more than enough to convict us. We don't even have to go on to the misdeed which knowingly, or even unknowingly, we commit, contrary to our God's commands. And we haven't even mentioned yet the root of all this unholiness, the sordid, sinful thoughts of our minds.

But, still, in order that we might actually serve him once he has called us to serve him, we all, like Isaiah was, need to be touched by the grace of God. Listen again to how this happened for Isaiah. ⁶Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. ⁷With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."

Can you illustrate what happened next in this heavenly scene? Did one of the seraphs stop shielding his face with two of his wings so he could see the altar and accurately pick up a live coal from the altar? Or didn't the holy angel, now that he was coming into the presence of sinful man need no humble, protective covering for his face?

These questions to the side, there is no question as to what the seraph did and the meaning of it. He well explains to the trembling prophet the gracious touching of God. "Isaiah, you honestly and well confessed your sin, saying you were a man of unclean lips. Behold, this live coal from God's holy altar has touched your mouth. Your guilt, the damning quality of your sin, is taken away. Your repeated missing of the mark, every ignorant and careless sin you have ever committed has been marked paid in full. God's grace has touched you; it frees you from trembling in God's presence for now you are a forgiven child of God."

As God calls out to you, even as he calls you to serve him, hasn't he touched us all in the same gracious way? We only need to think of the sins which happen even when we don't want them to, when we are trying with all our might to serve the Lord. This is not even to mention the deeper, darker moments when we know exactly what we are doing, knowing it is completely contrary to the holiness to which God has called us. And it all adds up to an overwhelming sense of guilt, a guilt so real we can feel it; it oppressed us, weighs us down, making us feel dirty, uncomfortable in the presence of God.

And then the redeeming, pardoning grace of God touches us, telling us there is now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The burden of our guilt is gone, lifted from our shoulders. For every careless sin, for every sin where we could care less how we've hurt God in thought, word or deed, there is atonement. Jesus Christ has paid for it all, his innocence canceling our guilt, his death giving us life, full, free and forever.

Is it any wonder, then, so touched by the grace of God, Isaiah responded the way he did when called by God to serve? Let's return to the verses of our text, hearing God's question and Isaiah's answer. ⁸Then 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!"

In the Book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ which John penned for the Lord, he describes the voice of God like the sound of the rushing of many waters, like the roar below Victoria Falls in Africa during the rainy season. If just seeing the presence of the Holy God sitting on this throne was enough to cause the prophet to tremble, shouldn't hearing the voice of God thundering from his throne have caused Isaiah to collapse on the floor in a fetal position, fearing for his life? Yes, if only he had not been touched by the grace of God, the voice of God now calling upon him, or someone like him, to serve. Notice, for Isaiah, for you and me, what being touched by God's grace first does to us when, following that touching God calls us to serve him. Hear it in the prophet's voice. "Here, it's me. Send me, be continually sending me!"

I'll freely admit it. There are some things about my former life as a WELS Administrator that I miss, especially the sending part of it. If you have ever talked to a district president or synod president and asked them what was the favorite part of their service to the Lord I'm willing to bet you the answer will be the same, "The Sending, Call Day!"

You can't imagine the excitement in the room, the electricity all around you! You have before you the opportunities for service, sometime any place in the world in the Calls to be filled. And, in the names before you, you have the servants God would be sending, through you, out into the entire world. It's very special, this sending!

It was the last time I would be serving in this special way; it was very special. I had already announced that after prayerful deliberation, I would ask the convention not to nominate me for another term as synod president. And so these assignments would be very special indeed; it would be the last time for this very special act of service for the Lord.

We were up at New Ulm, assigning the graduates of MLC to the first places where they would be called to serve. The next week, at WLS, we would be assigning the pastor candidates, including the first GMA, Graduate Mission Associate to China. We were all excited.

And then, right in the middle of Call Day at New Ulm, we were interrupted by call from Hong Kong, from Dr John Lawrenz, then president of ALS. As I went to take the call from my long time friend, John, I thought nothing of it, thinking only John, with the time difference and all, had forgotten what time it was, thinking he wants to talk about next week's assignment of the GMA. So I was little prepared for what John told me. It was me who was being called to serve as a guest professor in Hong Kong.

I don't think my colleagues on the COP needed to be told what had happened; they could see it on my face, how thrilled I was to be given yet another opportunity to serve. And that thrill has never gone away.

However, I will confess to you, as you may be still thinking to yourselves, yes there is the thrill of living and working in China, but aren't you forgetting about the trembling, the fear of not being up to the task before us? No, I'm not. Just like Isaiah, there are days when I reflect on my humanness. How can God use me, frail and sinful creature that I am? And, you may be thinking, too, it's not just my unclean lips, I'm unclean through and through. And yet, as God caused Isaiah to remember, as he wants me and you to remember, we all have been touched by God's grace, pardoned by his love. And so, trembling because of how inadequate we feel, but touched by how God's pardoning love makes us feel, the thrill is back, the thrill of being called to serve God in China or anywhere else in the world.

My dear friends, never let that thrill leave you. God knows who you are, trembling is a very natural response to how completely God knows all of us from the inside out. But the peace of God's pardon is what God wants to linger with you and me, today, tomorrow every day. And because we've all been touched by God's grace, may you ever be thrilled to be **STANDING IN THE PRESENCE OF THE HOLY GOD NOW AND FOREVER MORE**, serving him in any way he calls you to serve.