

To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ: mercy, peace, and love be multiplied to you, Amen. The text for our meditation this morning comes from Isaiah chapter 6, verses 1-7.

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. So I said: "Woe is me, for I am undone, because 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 live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged."*

**In the name of the one true Triune God, who was and is and is to be, dear fellow-redeemed:**

Americans, it seems clear, have lost sight of the *holiness* of God. This quality of God—that He is absolutely pure and righteous, and utterly separate from sin—has gone begging in recent decades. In its place, American preachers increasingly are offering their congregations a different God. The god they offer is a God who is familiar and comfortable, like a teddy bear; He is a God who overlooks sin. He is a God who tempers His demands on each person according to that person's ability to obey. Their god is even a God whose chief purpose—if you listen to some TV preachers—is not to rescue you from Hell, but to pad your bank account and make sure your business succeeds.

Preachers today have gone from being heralds of the holy God to being "life coaches." Instead of proclaiming from the pulpit the mysteries of God's eternal Word, they sit on a barstool in front of their congregation and give a little pep talk. They chat about current events, and they give people little tips for living.

What's missing? What's missing is a grasp of the *holiness* of God. There seems to be little fear of God any longer. Rare is reverence of the sort expressed by 15<sup>th</sup> century ecclesiast Richard Hooker, who wrote: "It is dangerous for the feeble brain of man to wade far out into the things of the Most High...Our soundest knowledge is to know that we know him not as indeed he is, neither can know him; and our safest eloquence concerning him is our silence, when we confess without confession that his glory is inexplicable, his greatness above our capacity and reach." Or as the LORD Himself says, "*As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts*" (Isaiah 55:9).

We cannot keep silent about God. It is in fact our mission as believers to tell others about the true, Triune God, and about the salvation He has provided in His Son. As Isaiah found out in our text for today, the first step in that mission is to reacquire a sense of the absolute, awesome holiness of this God whom we proclaim!

If you've felt a lack in your life lately of a wholesome fear of God, if you've been missing that sense of awe at His holy presence, then today's text is just what you need to hear. Join me in considering the theme: **HOLY, HOLY, HOLY IS OUR TRIUNE GOD! I. It is His holiness that condemns our sin and II. It is His holiness that provides atonement for our sin.**

## I.

It can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint when certain events in the Old Testament took place. For example, we don't have exact dates for the flood, or for the life of Job. But it's pretty easy to nail down exactly when Isaiah was called to his prophetic ministry. The events of our text took place, we're told, "*in the year that king Uzziah died,*" [v.1] or somewhere very close to 758 BC. Uzziah's story is an interesting one and one that reveals another example of not having proper fear of God.

Uzziah was the King of Judah, you may recall, who was so successful as a king that he thought he could be a priest as well. He went directly against God's Law and took incense into the Holy Place of the Temple—a job reserved by God for the priests. Before horrified witnesses, he was immediately struck with leprosy, and remained a leper until the day he died. King Uzziah failed to respect the absolute holiness of the Triune God, and it cost him dearly!

In the sixth chapter of the book of Isaiah, the prophet recalls the day he was called into the ministry. On that day he was given a vision by God. In Isaiah's case, the vision did not come in a dream. It appears to have occurred in broad daylight. Some have speculated that Isaiah may have been standing in the physical temple in Jerusalem when this vision came upon him. In any case, it is clear that God gave a glimpse of His heavenly court to Isaiah. What Isaiah saw left him awestruck and trembling: "*I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew.*" [vv.1b-2]

Isaiah saw the Lord! That is, he saw what the Lord allowed him to see of Himself. Moses was hidden by God in the cleft of the rock and allowed to see only as it were the afterglow of His glory "*for no man can see My face and live,*" God said (Exodus 33:20). In the same way, Isaiah was allowed to see a manifestation of God's glory. But it was enough. It was an awesome sight!

Isaiah saw the Lord's mighty throne elevated in the midst of the temple. The train of His glorious flowing robe was so long that it filled the temple. Special angels, called seraphim, are mentioned, and this is the only place in the Bible that they are mentioned. We don't know how many of these creatures there were. There may have been multitudes of them. Their name means "bright or burning ones," and they are presented as mighty beings with six wings. They encircled the throne of God. With two wings, each seraph shielded his face from the glory of the holy Presence, with two each covered his feet in humility, and with two each one hovered in the air.

What were the choirs of angels crying to one another? "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts!*" [v.3] Some higher critical scholars have cast doubt on whether this triple "Holy!" supports the doctrine of the Trinity. Well, let me ask you: "Do you think it's a *coincidence* that the angels praise the threefold God with a threefold shout of "*Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts*"? No, it's no coincidence. This passage certainly affirms the doctrine of the Trinity which is set forth so clearly in other passages like Matthew 28:19: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*" As we learned again today in the Athanasian Creed, our God is Triune—three distinct Persons in one true God. The doctrine of the Holy Trinity is one of the very pillars of our Christian faith.

The word "holy" is important to understand, in the first place because it is His very holiness which condemns our sin. God is holy in the sense that He is pure and righteous and entirely without sin. Holy means that the Lord is separate from sin, but not separate like the layers of a cake are separate. God is separate from sin like the top of Mount Everest is separate from the bottom of the ocean. They have *nothing* in common. Nothing sinful can stand in the presence of the holy, Triune God! Even the seraphim, themselves holy and without sin, had to shield their faces with their wings in the presence of the awesome holiness of God! At their cry, "*Holy, holy, holy!*" our text says "*...the posts of the door shaken, and the house was filled with smoke.*" [v.4]

Have you ever seen the posts of the door move? I've only seen it once and that was plenty for me. It was on February 28, 2001—the day of the Nisqually earthquake. I saw the doorposts and window frames flex and move like they were made out of rubber. It got my complete attention. It was an awe-inspiring experience, and I don't mind admitting that I was afraid. I noticed that no one ignored the Nisqually earthquake. No one thought they could define it, or control it, or contain it. No one sat around and had cozy little chats about it. *Everyone* was *afraid*, because that's what you are in an earthquake—you're afraid. You really can't do anything but submit to it and get under a table and hope it doesn't kill you.

But consider: Right now, as you sit here in God's House, you are in the presence of a force more awesome and powerful than the strongest earthquake. The holy Triune God is here, and we are wretched sinners! If you can see the reality of the situation, then you can begin to understand how Isaiah felt when he said, "*Woe is me, for I am undone, because 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*" [v.5] "I am undone" is a weak translation. Isaiah was sure he was about to die. It's as much as to say, "That's it! I've had it! I'm dead! I have come into the presence of the Triune God, and I cannot survive in the glare of his blinding holiness."

Do you ever feel that way? I hope you do! We need to understand the holiness of God and the damning power of our sins which offend that holiness! So often we're tempted to fall in with the view the world takes of God—to see Him as some sort of benevolent old gentleman who is tolerant of sin, and who requires little of us beyond some vague wish that we try to be nice people. That's not God. *This* is God: "*The LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God*" (Deuteronomy 4:24). "*The soul who sins shall die*" (Ezekiel 18:20). "*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...*" (Romans 1:18). "*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap*" (Galatians 6:7).

Holy, holy, holy is our Triune God! His holiness clearly and unmistakably condemns our sin. Flawed and wretched creatures that we are, we may well, like Isaiah, wince and cower in the presence of that awesome, absolute holiness. We too feel that we are undone! But praise be to God that is not the only manifestation of the holiness of our Triune God. For His holiness not only convicts us of sin, but it is His holiness that has provided atonement for our sin.

## II.

How comforting to note the way God treats Isaiah! He does not strike the sinner down for daring to come into His presence. God does not ignore Isaiah as unworthy of His attention. He does not leave him hanging there, demoralized, conscious of his sin and fearful of his destruction. No. Immediately, the Lord provides a solution: "*Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a live coal which he had taken with the tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth with it, and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged.'*" [vv.6-7]

Can you imagine the prophet's relief? One moment he is certain he is going to die, the next moment comes the pronouncement spoken by God through His servant the seraph: "Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is purged." Can you imagine? I think you *can* imagine that, can't you? I think you've experienced that, have you not? Which of you hasn't come to the Lord with a guilty conscience, burdened with sins, ashamed and afraid like the prodigal son to come into the presence of your Father? And what has been the Lord's response? Are you struck down? Are you rebuked? Are you made to wait in the agony of your guilt? No. Immediately your God says to you, "Have no fear! Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin purged!" With a sense of wonder you hear your Lord say to you as He said to the paralytic: "*Son, be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven you*" (Matthew 9:2). Returning to your Father you expect crushing condemnation. Instead, He falls upon your neck and kisses you, and says, "Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (Luke 15:22-24).

"*Your sin is purged,*" we read in our text, but again, "purged" is rather a feeble translation. Much closer to the meaning of the Hebrew word is the idea of "*atonement.*" In fact, this same word *kaphar* occurs in the name of the Jewish festival *yom kippur*, "the day of atonement." The verb means, literally, "to atone for, by offering a substitute." God has indeed atoned for your sin by offering a substitute in your place: Jesus Christ, the righteous. Jesus suffered and died on Calvary's cross so that you need not suffer eternal death. He drank the bitter cup of God's wrath in order to accomplish that atonement. Now all that's left for you is the sweet cup of salvation and joy. You may say, with the Apostle Paul, "*We also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom*

*we have now received the reconciliation” (Romans 5:11). Indeed, you may well sing with the seraphs, “Holy, holy holy is our Triune God!”*

What a comforting truth! Our Triune God in His holiness, provides atonement for our sin. But believe it or not, there is even more comfort to be found in this vision of Isaiah. Think about the way in which God bestowed His pardon on Isaiah. Certainly the almighty, Triune God was capable of simply pronouncing absolution upon the prophet. But He didn't. He used a means whereby He accomplished it. In His divine will, God ordained that a servant of His would take the tongs, carry the live coal from the altar, and touch the lips of the prophet with it, thereby purging his sin. By this visible, earthly means, ordained by God, Isaiah is given visible proof of his forgiveness.

Surely this is, at least, an edifying reminder to us that God comes to *us* through means, as well. Your God doesn't secretly inject faith into your heart in some invisible and mysterious way. He puts the Means of Grace right out there where you can see it! The Gospel in Word and Sacraments are the means through which salvation comes to you. The Gospel in the Word, in the Lord's Supper, and in Baptism is the tool the Holy Spirit always uses to create and to strengthen faith. *“Faith comes by hearing,”* says the Scripture, *“and hearing by the Word of God”* (Romans 10:17).

You know you have your Lord's forgiveness because you have His promise in black and white right there in your Bible! You know you have salvation because of the covenant of grace He entered into with you when you were baptized! You know that eternal life belongs to you because you receive the very body and blood of Christ, in, with and under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper! What a blessed assurance and how gracious is our God so to reinforce our faith with these visible means of grace!

In conclusion, let me ask you a question: “What is your first thought when you smell smoke? The first thing you think of is danger, isn't it? “Something's burning. Is it coming from the neighbors? Is it in my house somewhere? Where is it?” Smoke is connected with danger and peril in Scripture, as well. In Scripture it is often symbolic of God's holiness and of his burning wrath over sin. Think of Mt. Sinai and Sodom and Gomorrah. Think especially of Isaiah's vision, where the throne room of the Lord was filled with smoke. Maybe the next time you smell smoke, it will remind you of the holiness of God and prompt you to stand in awe of Him and give Him all glory.

There's another kind of smoke that's very attractive to me. I'm thinking of the smoke of snuffed candles at the close of worship service. To me that's the fragrance of prayers ascending to the throne of God, the sweet fragrance of the Word of God heard and believed, of sins confessed and sins forgiven, of Christians who have cast all their care upon the Lord and can now return to their homes cheerful and confident—and well you may. For you are the redeemed of Christ. “Your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is purged.”

Jesus has earned for you the right to join Isaiah and the angels singing “Holy, holy, holy is our Triune God.” May God hasten the day when we hear those joyful notes echoing in the hallowed courts of Heaven! For Jesus' sake. Amen.