

Isaiah 6:1-8

Epiphany 5C Midweek + February 13, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Holy with the Lord

The Word of the Lord from Isaiah 6:7: "Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, 'Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Where is Isaiah? The text says the temple, but think this through. If Isaiah is in the temple and pushes through the thick curtain into the Most Holy Place, he wouldn't see much: it would be pitch black because there were no lights behind the curtain. If he could see in the darkness, he would see the Ark of the Covenant sitting on the floor. It would be covered by the mercy seat – God's throne on earth, with a gold cherub sculptured at each end.

Isaiah kind of sees that, except not at all. It's not dark: it's brilliantly glorious. Rather than the mercy seat on the ark on the floor, the throne is high and lifted up. Instead of cherubim, he sees seraphim – not made of gold, but alive and flying above the throne. Instead of the quiet stillness of the Most Holy Place, the foundations of the thresholds are shaking.

Most significantly of all, the Lord is there. The seraphim call out His praises: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts," they cry. "The whole earth is full of His glory!"

The whole earth is full of His glory. Where is Isaiah? Is he on earth or is he in heaven? By the work of the Lord of hosts, maybe the best answer is "both." The temple is bigger on the inside than the outside, because the God of heaven and earth is there. And because the God of heaven and earth is there, heaven and earth have come together.

Better yet, perhaps we should just say, "Forget where Isaiah is. What really matters is not where he is, but that the Lord is there with him."

The Lord is there with Isaiah; and actually, that's a problem for the prophet who sums it up this way: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for 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!" No one can look upon the face of God and live: the Lord Himself told Moses back in Exodus 33, and here's Isaiah. He can't un-see the face of God, and he can't get rid of his uncleanness. He's done for – *unless* the Lord does something.

The Lord does do something: a seraph takes a burning coal from the altar and touches Isaiah's mouth. It doesn't burn and blister: instead, it purifies. The seraph says to Isaiah, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for." By the Lord's Word and a one-time sacrament with an element of burning coal, Isaiah is made clean before the Lord.

Instead of a dead man, Isaiah becomes a messenger for the Lord God of Sabaoth. The Lord Himself says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah says, "Here I am! Send me!"

Where is Isaiah? He's with the Lord. He's safe with the Lord, because the Lord is with him and the Lord has made him clean. The Lord has declared his sin is atoned for.

I suppose that Isaiah's vision is kind of how we expect an encounter with God to be: He's high and lifted up and glorious, and Isaiah is the sinner terrified by the holiness and majesty. But the message of Christianity is not an almighty deity and cowering sinners: you can find that theme in all sorts of religions. What separates Christianity from every other religion is how sins are atoned for. So as much as Isaiah's vision is remarkable and a beautiful comfort that the Most High God doesn't hold your sins against you, it's even better when you see it in light of tonight's Gospel lesson: there, God is now with Simon Peter, sitting in his boat. When Jesus performs a miracle to demonstrate His power and to bless Peter with an abundance of fish, Peter is terrified. He knows his unholiness, especially given his proximity to the holiness of God; and so he declares, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

But Jesus hasn't become man to terrify sinners. He has come to redeem them. Rather than depart from Peter, He absolves him by taking his fear away, by taking his sin away: and as he purified and called Isaiah into His service, so He to Peter. He says, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men." Then He continues on His way, eventually arriving at a hill called Calvary – not to terrify sinners with His glory and power, but to submit to death and judgment so that He might redeem them from their sins. Truly the earth is full of His glory, and His glory is most shown in His glorious sacrificial love for you on the cross.

The story doesn't end at Calvary, or at an empty tomb the third day after. In fact, it continues here and now.

Where are you? At Good Shepherd, of course. But soon you'll sing the song of seraphim: you'll be singing, "Holy, holy, holy Lord God of Sabaoth," and for the same reason they did. You're not just remembering an old Bible verse, but you're announcing the presence of the Most High God. You've already been doing so: at the start of the service, I said, "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit;" and you said, "Amen," because you're baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This is His service for you.

With the reality that God is present with His people, you did what Isaiah did: you confessed your unworthiness. Not, "Woe is me, for I am lost and unclean in the midst of unclean people," but "I a poor miserable sinner," and so forth. And how did the Lord respond to your admission that you don't deserve to be here? He didn't strike you down on the spot; but through a pastor's mouth He said, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of *the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*" It was really the same announcement as the seraph saying to Isaiah, "Your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

There's no burning coal for your mouth, though. What you receive is far better. The Lord Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again, puts His own body and blood to your lips so that you might be sure that your sins are atoned for, that you have grace and life and God's favor in Him.

It's like Isaiah 6 in another way: heaven and earth come together here. The Son of God who sits enthroned in heaven is also here with you. The altar rail stretches from here into heaven, for you are gathered into the body of Christ with Abraham and Sarah, with Mary and St. Paul, and with all the saints who have gone before us.

Where are you? Wherever you are, you have the assurance that the Lord is with you. You're born again by water and the Spirit, baptized in the name of the triune God. You are redeemed, washed clean in the blood of the Lamb. The same Lord who purified Isaiah and

cleansed Peter has gathered you here tonight to say to you: "Do not be afraid. Your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for, because I forgive you all of your sins."

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

Amen