

Isaiah 6:1-8 - 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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another:

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

<sup>4</sup> At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> “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.” <sup>6</sup> Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. <sup>7</sup> With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.” <sup>8</sup> Then 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!”

*Holy, Holy, Holy*

*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*

*(Revelation 1:5b-6)*

When he heard his name being called over the loud speaker, ringing through the halls of his high school, he thought it probably wasn't a good thing. When he heard not only his name, but also the fact that his presence was requested in the principal's office, he felt a little more strongly that this probably wasn't a good thing. He wasn't the worst trouble maker, but he was always the kind of guy who had one degree of separation from the real hooligans – a fringe type, you know? So when he crossed the threshold to the principal's office, his mind started to race – "What could he want to talk to me about? Could he possibly know about *this*? Am I finally getting in trouble for *that*?" What could he do? So before the principal could say anything, this young man opened his mouth and out poured a lengthy confession of all the shenanigans he'd been party to over his high school years. Cascading out came tales of pranks and parties, of lies told and classes skipped. When this young man had finished his cathartic confession, the principal sat there for a moment in stunned silence. Then he told this young man why he'd called him in: "Actually, you've been chosen to receive an award for being the exemplary student of the semester." What is it about being in the presence of authority that compels us to start talking, especially when they're silent? Have you ever been pulled over by a police officer and you hear the question, "Do you know why I pulled you over?" "How long were you following me? Well, where to start?! I didn't come to a complete stop, I failed to use my turn signal, I guess I was going a little fast back there." What is that? Maybe it's because they're the ones who know right from wrong, they're in charge of enforcing it, and when we're in the wrong, we think it's painfully obvious to them as well.

So how do you think the prophet Isaiah felt? He wasn't called into the principal's office and he wasn't having a conversation with the local law enforcement outside his car window. Listen to him describe his encounter with ultimate authority and perfect power, **In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on the throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. 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. And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.** Can you even imagine? Words can hardly describe the sight! The Lord Almighty seated on his throne, the train of his robe filling the entire temple, billows of holy smoke, angels flying overhead, screaming out praises to God so loudly that the firmest and fixed parts of the foundation were shaking, flaming, fiery angels soaring and singing – even these holy creatures cover their face and their feet in the presence of God's holiness – and in the middle of all of it, there stood Isaiah. What comes to mind is the old Sesame Street song: "*One of these things is not like the others, one of these things doesn't belong.*" Like showing up to a black tie affair wearing your swim trunks, it was obvious he didn't belong.

When the angels cried out, **Holy, holy holy**, they weren't just stuck on repeat; they were telling us something about God, and about us. To be holy means to be set apart, to be separated. And so, to pile on one after another **Holy, holy, holy** shows just how set apart, how far removed, how fundamentally distant the holy God is from sin and anything sinful. **Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty**, and you're not him. Do you get it? Isaiah sure did. Confronted with the unveiled, unmistakable holiness of God Almighty, Isaiah came to the only conclusion he could possibly arrive at, "**Woe to me! I am ruined!**" Isaiah knew that nobody could see God in all his glory, and live. Isaiah also knew just how far short he'd fallen of God's glory. "**Woe to me! 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!**" So much for thinking that God is my buddy; that he doesn't mind if I do my own thing; that he'll validate my life choices just as long as I'm sincere. The holy, holy, holy God knows and he sees. Isaiah confessed it right away;

there's no sense in trying to hide – **I am a man of unclean lips**. Confronted with the awesome holy, holy, holiness of God, what do you have to say? *I've tried hard. I came to church. I gave decent offerings. I'm certainly not as bad as that guy next door! Really?*

You might think, *"Well pastor, of course I'd never try to haul in my filthy rags of righteousness before a holy God!"* But don't we? Don't we sometimes think that we can effect some kind of change in God, or twist his arm? *If I'm really, I mean really sorry for my sins, then God will just have to forgive me. If I promise never to do that thing again, and then I show everyone around me just how much I'm not doing that thing...if I improve in the future...if I balance it out with something good...then God will be pleased.* So, we slide our measly bribes a few inches across God's infinite table, but that just digs us a deeper hole. Confronted with the awesome holiness of God, I confess with Isaiah, **I am a man of unclean lips**. But the holy, holy, holy God knows that I can't stop there. It's like Jesus said, **out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks**. I am a man of unclean lips, unclean hands, unclean heart, unclean mind. Everything is laid bare before the King of kings – every secret lust, every idle word, every hateful thought – all of it, as plain as the nose on your face when you stand in the presence of God's holiness. One of the most popular lies about God is that he's gone soft on sin. But look at Isaiah cowering in fear, effectively put to death by the presence of God and the knowledge of his own sin. So, how do you plead before the holy, holy, holy God?

Whenever we talk about the attributes (descriptions) of God, we need to ask ourselves the question, *Is this good news or bad news? Is this comforting or terrifying?* For example, when the Bible tells us that God is present everywhere, is that bad news or good news, law or gospel? Well, since God is present everywhere that means he's always with me...and it also means that he's there even when I turn my back on him in sin. When the Bible tells us that God knows everything, is that bad news or good news, law or gospel? Since God knows everything, he knows exactly what I need, when I need it, and how to get it to me...and it also means that he knows even the secret sins of my heart that I desperately try to keep hidden. So how about the question at hand today? The angels cry out **Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty** – bad news or good news, law or gospel? If this lesson from Isaiah 6 stopped here, I think we'd know the answer. Isaiah saw it, we know it, and there's no sense denying it. Because of sin, you, me, and Isaiah deserve to be sent straight to hell, because God is holy and we're not. But just as it's the case with all those other descriptions of God, when we talk about God's holiness, there's both law and gospel; warning and comfort; killing and making alive again.

But that doesn't make sense, does it? What do warning and comfort have to do with each other? What do death and life have in common? In other words, how can God be holy and just but at the same time be gracious and forgiving? At one and the same time, how can God be all knowing and promise to forget your sins and remember your iniquities no more? Where do those seemingly incompatible attributes of God meet? At the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus came into the world to show us that God is holy, by dying on the cross to make the full payment the sins of the world. Jesus came into the world to show us that God is love, by not demanding that terrible payment from us. Just as Jesus said in our gospel lesson, **God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him**. Do you want to know who God is and what he's like? Stand a sinner in front of him and see what he does. God is holy. But his holiness is not just a holiness that condemns the sinner. It's a holiness that saves the sinner.

This holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty is the Savior God who's wholly, wholly, wholly on your side in Christ. Watch what happens after Isaiah is crushed by the holiness of God, **Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for."** Who does that? What kind of God is this? God is holy and demands payment for sin, so he picked up the tab himself. Christ has taken

away your guilt and removed your sin as far as the east is from the west. The Holy Spirit, working through the gospel brings you to trust that **God so loved the world** and that means he loves me, too. In Christ, your sins are forgiven, forgotten, forever. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – the Triune God – went to work to make you his own and bring you into his family. That’s grace – undeserved love that led a holy God to declare you to be holy in his sight through Christ.

Isaiah had expected to feel the backhand of a holy God’s righteous wrath, but instead received the Father’s forgiving embrace. So, when the Lord God is looking for a messenger, what else could Isaiah do? **Then 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!”** Isaiah had gone from “Woe” to “Go.” Overwhelmed by God’s undeserved love, Isaiah couldn’t think of anything but sharing it. As people who have been brought from death to life in the gospel, that same privilege is ours. You might think, “*God could certainly find a better messenger,*” and you’d be right. But in his grace, he sends you and me to bring his love to others. God uses unlikely means and unlikely messengers – he uses words and people like us to speak those words! So speak! Do you know someone who says she’s ‘done with church’? I bet you do. You can be the one who tells her that God isn’t done with her – his reconciling love, his new mercies, his forgiveness, all for her. Do you have a neighbor who feels like God is so distant and so far-removed from his life? I bet you do. You can be the one who tells him that God isn’t far-removed. In fact, he is so close, he took on our human flesh to be our brother and bear our sins. Do you have a church that longs to share the gospel with more people right here in this town? I know you do. You’ve been brought from death to life in Christ, so you can joyfully jump in and pray for God’s blessings on your ministry here. Why? Not because you have to. Why? Because **Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty**, and through faith in Christ, you are, too.

Amen

*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*

(Jude 24-25)