

“AN ENCOUNTER WITH A HOLY GOD.”

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for the Sermon: Isaiah 6:1-8; Colossians 3:5-13

Introduction.

In India cows are holy. Muslims wage Holy War. Catholics have holy water. Monty Python searched for the Holy Grail. Israel is called the Holy Land. We observe holy week.

What is truly holy today? What is truly sacred? Is anything sacred anymore? Have we lost a sense of what is holy? Have we become so familiar with what is unholy that we have made our peace with it and become comfortable with it? Does anything make us blush or ashamed?

With easy divorce, marriage is no longer sacred.

With abortion, life is no longer sacred.

With sexual immorality, sex is no longer sacred.

With casual familiarity toward God, worship is no longer sacred.

The more our culture banishes God from the public square, the more it also throws off any sense of what is holy or sacred. When we lose a sense of the holiness of God then nothing is holy or unholy. And with this goes any notion of sin, that anything is against a holy God.

What can be done? How do we recover a sense of the sacred, of reverence and awe? The best place to start is at the source, at the beginning, with the One who is holy.

We need an encounter with the Holy God like Moses and Isaiah and Peter and Paul.

When talking about the holiness of God the classic text is Isaiah 6:1-8.

An Encounter with a Holy God.

The Presence of a Holy God, 6:1-4.

In the year King Uzziah died. Uzziah had reigned for 52 years, not as long as Queen Elizabeth in England, the longest reigning British monarch at 63 years, but a really long time. He was mostly a good and godly king. Under his leadership Israel had grown and expanded and enjoy a time of prosperity and peace. But in the end he sinned against God by treating what was holy in an irreverent manner and was afflicted with leprosy and died.

It was an unsettling time in the kingdom of Israel. The king was dead. The death of a long serving king meant instability, confusion, fear. And then comes an important reminder. Uzziah may be dead, but the King is not dead, He is still on the throne, high and lifted up.

Isaiah has a divine encounter with the holy God. He sees things and hears things hard to explain. He sees creatures called seraphim, mentioned only here in the Bible.

He hears the repetition, holy, holy, holy. To say something three times is the Hebrew language way of using all caps, bold and underlined. This is taking things to the superlative degree. Of all God's attributes only this one is raised to the third power. We never hear wise, wise, wise, or grace, grace, grace.

What is the meaning of this superlative attribute of God? Countless writers have tried. Trying to define God's holiness carries us to the brink of human language.

One speaks of God's supremacy and altogether greatness, His consuming majesty, His exalted loftiness (R.C. Sproul).

Another speaks of God as "solitary in His majesty, unique in His excellency, peerless in His perfections" (A.W. Pink).

It's like writers are trying to stand on tiptoe to reach for words off the highest shelf: supremacy, grandeur, splendor, majesty, unique, solitary, exalted, infinitely, completely, absolutely, utterly, beyond description, incomprehensible, wholly other, transcendent.

Here is my attempt. Holiness is the transcendent majesty and splendor of God that makes Him utterly and absolutely unique and solitary, set apart, morally pure and perfect, infinitely exalted above and beyond us and all creation.

But even after we have said that we still fall short. God's holiness is not anything like what we can comprehend. Our understanding of God's holiness is clouded and corrupted and diminished by our sin and sinfulness. Only in heaven will we begin to truly understand.

Holiness is what separates God from everything else in all creation. God is not like us. There is an infinite gulf or gap between God and us. God is (*sui generis*) in a class all by Himself, there is nothing or no one else even remotely close.

God is called holy more than any other attribute. Holy is God's name, the Holy One of Israel. Holy is His essence, for Him to cease to be holy would mean He ceases to be God.

Because God is holy all His attributes are holy, holy love, holy grace, holy wisdom, holy wrath, holy justice, holy power. This is the attributes of attributes, the highest attribute, the preeminent perfection of God.

The most holy thing or being in creation cannot even look on God's holiness. The highest creatures before the throne of God still cover their faces and feet.

This is what Isaiah saw and heard and felt. “My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts, the Holy One whose glory fills the whole earth.”

The Devastation of Holiness, 6:5-7.

For the average American Christian today, Isaiah’s response seems over the top. Our sense of God is so small that a response like Isaiah’s borders on fanatical. As I said at the beginning, when we lose a sense of the holiness of God then we lose any ability to contrast our sinfulness to Him.

We show our understanding of the holiness of God by our response to it. If we are indifferent, unmoved, without repentance, then we are clueless to the nature of our God and what He is like.

Or if we think that coming to Jesus is about feeling better about ourselves or building our self-esteem, we show how influenced we are by a therapeutic model of who Jesus is.

If we don’t tremble, if we aren’t shaken, if we don’t have some kind of moral shock, if we don’t have some deep realization of our sinfulness, then we don’t get it.

Only the Holy Spirit can do this in us and when He does, it is a gift, a mercy, however painful.

For Isaiah his encounter with a holy God was an emotionally violent experience. He saw God and then he saw himself and he was humbled by his depravity, humiliated by his iniquity, shamed by his sin, ruined by his rebellion. Listen to it again and try to appreciate His encounter with holiness.

Isaiah 6:5 “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!”

Isaiah was a prophet, a man regarded as righteous by God. He was highly regarded by the people and highly esteemed by his peers. Who knows, Isaiah might even have had a rather high estimation of himself, maybe he thought he was somebody, maybe starting to believe his own press. That happens to all of us when we compare ourselves to each other.

But when he saw himself contrasted to God all he saw in himself was his uncleanness, his impurity. He feels like a leper before God. He’s utterly undone by the blazing brilliance of God’s majesty, splendor and moral perfection.

Why does Isaiah mention his mouth? Because out of the heart the mouth speaks. Our mouths betray the condition of our hearts. In each one of all our hearts are the seeds of every sin known to man. If it wasn’t for a right combination of upbringing, societal restraints, laws, fear of getting caught and the pure grace of God we would fall headlong into any number of terrible sins.

Do we not tremble at our moral weakness and frailty and frequent failures? Woe is me, a man of unclean heart among a people of unclean hearts.

Whatever he knew about his sin before, now he sees the depths in the light of God's purity. "I am ruined, I am coming apart at the seams, I am as good as dead."

Isaiah knew that he had no right or ability to be in the presence of God and that, in fact, He deserved to die. Notice he doesn't even ask for mercy, he believes himself to be hopeless.

But God in His kindness and mercy deals with Isaiah's unholiness. He symbolically takes Isaiah's sin away. God ministers to us at the point and place of our confession. He forgives and cleanses what we acknowledge, what we name in repentance.

This action is the *pattern* for how God deals with us. This action anticipates the work of Christ on the cross who atones for our sins and cleanses us from all unrighteousness.

God has a plan for making us holy and for making it possible for us to have fellowship with Him.

When we agree with God about our sin, a seraph flies from the cross and brings to our hearts the atoning sacrifice of Christ. By His blood we are forgiven. And he who has been forgiven much, loves much.

He who has a small perspective of his sin will have a small perspective of God and His holiness and the wonders of God's forgiveness and grace.

Implications and Application.

Our Response to Holiness, Isaiah 6:8 (Colossians 3:5-13)

Holiness for us is both a reality (we are in Christ and indwelt by His Holy Spirit) and a command (be holy). It is ours in Christ and it is increasingly to become ours in cooperation with the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

God has made us holy (I Peter 2:9) and God commands us to be holy (I Peter 1:15-16).

Isaiah's vision of the transcendent God led to personal transformation. The implication of so great a revelation is a personal transformation. The true character of God when truly seen produces conviction and change in our character.

Because God is holy and because we are created in the image of a holy God, God has made holiness the moral condition and necessity for true health and happiness. To be holy is to be truly well, whole, sound and healthy.

God did not say, “Be as holy as I am holy.” He said, “Be holy as I am holy” (I Peter 1:16).

We are to be like God in similarity, not in equality. The light of a candle is not equal to the sun, but its light is similar to the light of the sun, just in a lesser degree.

We are not called to an absolute holiness, but to a relative holiness, a holiness that is given to redeemed believers by God through His Holy Spirit in us.

Just as God is separate from what is profane and sinful, so God has always made a people for Himself to be holy. He drew to Himself a nation and made them a Holy nation. In the NT His people are called saints, those belonging to His Holy church. God is the Holy One who dwells among us, who draws us to Himself and makes us more and more like Him.

Holiness is a daily putting to death of sin, radically, seriously, systematically, painfully, constantly, over and over again, killing every sin.

Sin demoralizes and defeats us. Sin robs us of our confidence and boldness before God. Sin robs our peace and joy. Flee from it by fleeing to God, repenting and crying out for mercy.

Separate yourself from whatever defiles you, whatever drags you down into fleshly desires, whatever fills you with worldliness. TV shows and movies with nudity. Internet, books, video games that promote ungodly behavior.

Separate yourself from irreverence, from making light or little of God, to treating God as someone who is no big deal, an occasional friend.

Holiness is evident in obedience to God’s will (Isaiah 6:8). Holiness is not an experience, it’s not a one-time attainment. Holiness is a long-term rebuilding project, a daily labor of conforming our ruined character into the character of Christ by Word and Spirit. It is a long hard obedience in the same direction toward the same destination, the heavenly city.

Isaiah 57:15 For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

*“I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

That’s an incredible promise, the Holy God promises to come down, to condescend to come to us and dwell with those whose heart is humble, contrite, poor in Spirit.

The holiness of God makes the Gospel an absolute necessity. Scripture says without holiness no one will see God, which means without Christ’s holiness being made available to us we would never see God.

Jesus is working right now to make His church on earth holy. That is what He is up to. He is disciplining us “that we may share in His holiness” (Hebrews 12:10). He is sanctifying us “that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:27).

Titus 2:11-14 The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, 13 waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, 14 who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

Colossians 3:5-17 Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming. 7 In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. 8 But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices 10 and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ... 12 Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, ... 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, ... 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

Pray: Holy Father, create in me a clean heart. My heart is full of leprosy, it defiles everything it touches, it will keep me from seeing you if you do not change my heart and give me a heart of flesh to love you and know you and obey you. Send your Holy Spirit into me to refine me and purify me and make me a temple fit for you to indwell. You command me to be holy, so now enable what you command and by your grace make me holy, by the blood of Jesus and the power of your Spirit, for the sake of your glory, Amen.