

GOD IS HOLY

Isaiah 6:1-8

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SCRIPTURE

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. {7} With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for." {8} 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 6:1-8 NIV).

INTRODUCTION

Billy Graham, who passed away last year (1918-2018), was perhaps the best known religious leader in America. Can you imagine a journalist summarizing Graham's life by saying, "He was a Southerner who liked to travel?" Now that is true so far as it goes but it hardly captures the essence of Graham's life. To talk about Graham and never mention that he was an evangelist, a preacher of the Gospel, is to miss the main point of his life.

We have a similar problem when we talk of God. God is Spirit. God is just. God is all-knowing. But what is the chief characteristic of God? To help us answer that question we need to turn to a prophet by the name of Isaiah who lived in the 8th century before Christ.

1. THE HOLINESS OF GOD IS PRIMARY

Isaiah had an experience with the holiness of God. He dates it to the death of King Uzziah. Uzziah reigned for 52 years. Think about that. A whole generation of people knew only one ruler. Can you picture an American politician being President for 52 years!

Uzziah died and the whole nation went into deep mourning. Those of you who were alive when President Kennedy was killed have a sense of what it is like for a nation to mourn for the death of its leader. Or you might think of the tragic death of Princess Dianna (whose favorite hymn, by the way, was *I Vow To Thee, My Country* – the song Jodine played just a few minutes ago). So we can have some appreciation for what was going through the mind of young Isaiah. The only ruler he had ever known was dead. He sought solace in the temple. There in the temple he met the king. No, not Uzziah. He was dead. Rather, Isaiah met *the* King, the Lord Almighty.

In this vision in the temple he saw seraphim, which are angelic beings (the word means “fiery ones”), and they were calling back and forth, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty” (Is 6:3). These words should be familiar to most churchgoers because many songs are based on these words including the classic hymn by that name, “Holy, holy, holy.”

Why do we say “holy” three times? Why can’t we just say it once? It seems redundant, doesn’t it? If you see someone smiling, do you go up to them and ask, “Are you happy, happy, happy?” If you are feeling blue do you say, “I’m sad, sad, sad?” No, we do not talk this way. But this is a difference between Hebrew and English. In English if we want to emphasize something we have many tools at our disposal such as underlining, bold face and exclamation points. In Hebrew if you want to emphasize something you use repetition. This helps explain some of the things that Jesus said. For example, in John Chapter 3, Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus was not stuttering when he repeated “truly.” He was making an emphatic statement. Nicodemus would have understood the repetition. Jesus was saying, in effect, “There are teachings and there are teachings but this one is really important so pay attention.”

On rare occasions something would be stressed to the third degree which would put it in the superlative. By saying something three times, the person was saying that the statement was of the greatest possible importance. Everything else pales in comparison.

If you search the Scriptures you will find that one and only one characteristic of God is ever lifted to this three-fold emphasis. It is not love. It is not justice. It is not wisdom. (Although these are certainly characteristics of God). Rather, it is the holiness of God. God is holy, holy, holy. Holiness is the primary attribute of God as he has revealed himself to us. God is love but it is a holy love. God is justice but it is a holy justice. God is wisdom but it is a holy wisdom. To talk about God and never mention his holiness would be like describing Mother Theresa as a short woman who used to live in India. You would be missing something terribly important.

Americans have problems with the holiness of God. We easily dismiss it. We tend to think of God as a parachute: useful in an emergency but we would just as soon not have to use it. God is holy. Holiness is the chief attribute of God. His love, justice, and wisdom all have to be understood in the light of his holiness.

Holiness is the primary characteristic of God and consequently our primary petition to God is that God's name be kept holy. A little boy claimed to know the name of God. His mother thought that was interesting and so asked, "Okay, what is God's name?" He replied, "Harold." Puzzled, his mother then asked, "Why do you think God's name is Harold?" "Because," said the boy, "It says so in the prayer we say at church. Our Father who art in heaven, Harold be thy name!"

Of course, God's name is not Harold. And it is not Hallowed, either— Although we act like it is when we say the Lord's prayer aloud without thinking about the words. To hallow is to keep holy. We are to keep God's name holy. There are several petitions in the Lord's Prayer. But the first one is that we keep God's name holy. First and foremost we are to recognize the holiness of God.

When I pray I remember the sick, I pray for peace, I pray for loved ones and I pray for myself, especially if I am in trouble (which means I pray all the time). You may follow a similar pattern, and that is fine. But how often when we pray do we ask God to help us recognize his holiness?

2. THE HOLINESS OF GOD CAUSES TERROR

What is holiness? R.C. Sproul, the well-known American theologian (1939-2017), devoted his life to the study of the holiness of God, and he said that the holiness of God is difficult to describe. Not exactly a helpful comment for the rest of us!

Rudolph Otto, the German scholar who lived at the beginning of the 20th century, took a scientific approach to the holiness of God. He carried out in-depth research. He made a detailed analysis of the various statements people made. He conducted interviews. He also had his own personal struggle with this concept so much so that he ended up inventing a term: *Mysterium Tremendum* (What do you think of that? If you ever want to impress somebody at a party just throw out *Mysterium Tremendum!*) is the term invented by Rudolph Otto to describe the awful mystery of experiencing the holiness of God.

The Hebrew word for holy means to "set aside for a special use." The root meaning is "to cut something." This idea has carried through the centuries and we even use it today in the English language. For example, if someone is an exceptional athlete we say that he or

she is a cut above the rest. Someone who is a cut above the rest is special, unique and not like the others. God is, if you will, a cut above the rest. He is unique. There is no one, no thing, that is like God. God is completely other. God is holy.

When Isaiah had this vision of God in the temple he became acutely aware of his creatureliness – the fact that he was different from God. He saw these angels and even though they were the brightest things he had ever seen, even they could not look upon God. They covered their eyes.

God said to Moses, “No one can look upon me and live” (Ex 33:20). Moses wanted to see God and even requested to see God, but God did not grant the request. Instead, God placed Moses in the cleft of a rock above a canyon. God then sent part of his glory through that canyon and only after that glory had passed by did God allow Moses to look. Moses got to see the hind quarters of the passing glory of God and even then it was a traumatic experience. It physically changed him. His face glowed. Moses came down from the mountain and when the people saw him they ran in terror. Moses had to put a veil over his face so people could approach him. Ponder that. These people were scared out of their minds just by seeing this glow on Moses’ face which he got by seeing the backside of part of the passing glory of God. A direct vision of God would be as horrific as it would be incomprehensible. As we are now, we cannot look upon God and live.

Isaiah saw the robe of God (metaphorically speaking). He said, “. . . the train of his robe filled the temple” (Is 6:1). He was not talking about Amtrack. He was talking about the extension of his robe. In both ancient and modern times, the length of the robe determined your status as a monarch. When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned she had this huge robe. It was a symbol of power.

How long was God’s robe that Isaiah saw? It was so long it filled the temple. There was no place in the temple where it was not – indicative of God’s power and presence which is everywhere.

Isaiah tells us that the temple doors shook. The walls shook. The arches shook. The supports shook. But let me tell you something, none of those things shook half as much as Isaiah did. He was terrified to be in the presence of Almighty God the Creator of all things.

But he was even more terrified to be in the presence of an Omnipresent judge. He cried, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips” (Is 6:5). The lips. The lips are the boundary between our inner selves and the outer world, the border between our thoughts and are actions. Isaiah said his lips were

unclean which was a poetic way of saying he was a sinner before God. From a worldly point of view this was a strange thing for Isaiah to say because he was the most righteous person of his time. If he lived in our day we would say something like, “If anybody is going to get to heaven, it will be Isaiah.” Ever hear that expression before? Sometimes we say that when a prominent member of the church dies. It is not biblical to say it but we say it anyway. Outwardly, Isaiah was a virtuous person. But in the temple he discovered the true nature of God and he discovered the true nature of Isaiah. Isaiah was a good man when compared to his contemporaries. But when confronted by the author of goodness he saw how short he fell. If this was how a person like Isaiah responded to the holy presence of God, how are we to respond? Are we to somehow be less aware of our sinfulness and creatureliness? No.

Isaiah said, “I am ruined!” – literally, “coming undone” (Is 6:5). He felt like he was splitting apart. Every molecule of his body screamed in dread and tried to take flight from the awful presence of the judge of all the earth. But there was no place to go, no place to hide from God.

3. THE HOLINESS OF GOD MEANS WHOLENESS

Did God leave Isaiah in this state of trembling and fear? No.

God is holy and God is full of grace. He sent his angel to take a coal from the altar, so hot that he had to use tongs, and that coal was placed against Isaiah’s lips. Remember, the lips represent the border between thoughts and actions, our inner selves and the outer world. Instantaneously there was an acrid smell of burning flesh that would have inflamed Isaiah’s nostrils, intense pain and agony followed, because there are few places on the body more tender than the lips. Why did God do that? Cruelty? No. Isaiah knew he was unrighteous, he was in the wrong with God. He wanted things to be right. He grieved over his sinfulness. It was not just a case of saying, “Oh, I’m sorry God,” as if Isaiah and God were dinner guests at a party and Isaiah accidentally sat in the wrong chair. No. He mourned over his condition. He made a desperate plea for help.

God cleansed Isaiah, not superficially, but right down to the core of his being. That brief second of agony led to an eternal healing. That severe mercy brought everlasting joy. Isaiah was made whole.

Only a holy God can make you whole. Have you met a holy God? Some people worship a god of health and wealth. Some people worship a god of self-fulfillment. Some people worship a god of sentimentality. But only a holy God can make you whole. Have you met a holy God?

We cannot take shortcuts. It was necessary for Isaiah to genuinely repent of his sin. It is also necessary for us. And if our hearts are broken before God and we know how desperately we need help, God will come to us and make us whole, as well.

How many times have you heard John 3:16? ("For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.") Dozens and dozens of times? It is frequently quoted in church. You see it on signs. During the football game on the radio, all over the place. We hear it so often we no longer listen to it. For God so loved, For God so loved. We take that for granted. It's no big deal. Of course, For God so loved... It's a yawner. But not if you have any sense of the holiness of God! Then you can begin to appreciate the severity of Christ's sacrifice – the depths he descended in order to raise us up!

Hebrews 10:10 tells us that because of Christ's sacrifice we are made holy. Therefore, if you place your trust in Christ, someday you will see God and live! Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Mt 5:8 NIV). Now my heart is not pure. No Christian in the world today has a pure heart. But someday that will change. The Apostle John tells us, "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 Jn 3:2-3 NRSV).

God wanted someone to bring his message to the people of the world. He said, "Whom shall I send?" Isaiah replied, "Here am I. Send me!" Notice, he did not say, "Here I am!" He was not trying to tell God where he was. Rather, he was telling God that he was willing to serve him. The natural response to the mercy of God is willing obedience.

If God has cauterized you, if God has cleansed you, if God has restored you then you will want to serve God. Why are you here in worship? To fulfill a religious obligation? To get something from the service? Or are you here in grateful response to what Jesus Christ has already done for you? Are you here to seek a holy God who alone can make you whole?

CONCLUSION

Bonnie Hansen had a problem. Her young grandson wanted to go to the "big" church. Up to this point he had only gone to the preschool room for Sunday School. Bonnie reluctantly agreed to take little Daniel to the big church. Daniel said, "I can't wait to see God!" But that only made Bonnie even more nervous. Sunday came and they stepped into the sanctuary. Daniel looked up at the large cross at the front. He pointed with his finger and said, "Look grandma. Jesus is already here waiting for us."

Jesus is already here waiting for us. And because of Jesus Christ we know we are loved by and can return that love to a holy God.

Let us pray:

Lord, help us by your Spirit to begin to apprehend you awesome holiness and through your Son find forgiveness and wholeness and a willingness to serve in his name. Amen.