

Our Holy LORD

02/14/2021

Scripture 1: (Isaiah 6:1-7 ESV)

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!”

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: “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!”

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 atoned for.”

Scripture 2: (Mark 15:22-39 ESV)

And they brought him to the place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull). And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh, but he did not take it. And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And the inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two robbers, one on his right and one on his left. And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!” So also the chief priests with the scribes mocked him to one another, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also reviled him.

And when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which means, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And some of the bystanders hearing it said, “Behold, he is calling Elijah.” And someone ran and filled a sponge with sour wine, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

Sermon:

The prophet Isaiah is the most influential writer of the Old Testament Scriptures, following Moses. His ministry, prophecies, and writings covered the whole scope of redemptive history: from promises of temporal rescue for God's people, oracles of judgment against the nations and the wicked within Israel, offering God's chosen people hope for the forgiveness of our sins, hope for the Messiah to come (and come again), as well as the physical and spiritual work of this anointed "servant of the LORD" to be done on behalf of all God's elect, to the dual positive and negative expectation and promise concerning the coming *Yom Adonai*, the "Day of the LORD".

Isaiah was important to the New Testament writers, being quoted or referenced some eighty-five (or more) times; with the Psalms being the only portion of Scripture quoted more frequently. Jesus, the incarnate Son of God Himself, displayed for those around Him the importance of Isaiah's words when He read from the Isaiah Scroll (chapter 61) in synagogue, sat down and declared, "*Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*" (Luke 4:21 ESV). Now, after seventy-five years of archaeological efforts digging around in the caves of Qumran by the Dead Sea, the only scroll, the only part of sacred Scripture that has been found preserved and recovered in its entirety is the Scroll of Isaiah. *Coincidence? I think not.* Today, Isaiah and his writings still hold a strong significance for Orthodox Judaism (however, they interpret the "Servant of the LORD" or the "suffering servant" as Israel and the whole Jewish people, rather than the singular Messiah).

So, if the words of the prophet Isaiah are important to the Jews past and present, important to the Apostles and other New Testament writers, and important to Jesus Himself, then I ask you, why? How important is Isaiah for us, now?

The answer to that question has already filled countless, expansive volumes over the past two thousand years, and perhaps one day we may get to explore this question together, more deeply; but today, I will answer the question from the point of a single foundation, presented in our text this morning: the holiness of the LORD.

The prophet Isaiah had the greatest understanding and appreciation for the holiness of God, since Moses. He understood the simplest, most fundamental fact affecting all creation: that the LORD, God Almighty, is Holy and we are not. Isaiah was brought before God's throne, to the heavenly temple where he was confronted by the LORD's holiness and then charged to convey a message to God's people. All that he did and wrote afterwards was driven by this understanding of God's holiness and man's sinfulness. Perhaps this is also why within his writing we find so clearly displayed an outline of the LORD's eternal, sovereign plan for our redemption? The Holy Spirit has provided us a "road map" through the book of Isaiah to Jesus Christ, and the journey begins here with the holiness of God.

What is holiness? What does it mean to be "holy"? We commonly define "holy" as something that is "set apart" for a special purpose, but that is not entirely correct; we might set apart an egg yolk from the whites to make a meringue, but that is not holy, even if it is tasty. Being "set apart" is only a portion of the whole; yes, something that is "sacred" is something set apart for God, but

true holiness is so much greater, so much more; moral perfection and purity is also a part. The holiness of God is transcendent, above, beyond, and greater than anything in creation; it is the most absolute, perfect perfection; something so pure and true that it must be singular. True holiness is unique and only attributable to God Himself; all three Persons of the Trinity. The closest thing or greatest heights of human attempts at purity, righteousness, and holy living being God's image-bearers, apart from Him, apart from Christ, is only an echo, a copy, a facsimile, imperfect, and false; thus, unholy. It may look holy to us, but from the LORD's perspective, it is not.

So, Isaiah was brought to the heavenly Temple where he saw this unearthly and transcendent sight: the LORD of hosts, enthroned and seated at the entrance to the Temple. We (as modern evangelical Christians) consider our own future time, that moment when we will stand before His throne, often thinking it will be more casual and certainly a positive experience because of the grace we know that we have received by our faith in Christ; approaching the Throne boldly through prayer as God's chosen and adopted children, because of the work of our Advocate and Brother, Jesus. I expect that we would be wrong, for this sight which Isaiah saw, was neither welcoming or comforting to him, nor do I expect it will be for any one of us, **at first**. Isaiah's reaction and response, to him standing in the LORD's presence, is one of abject terror and horror; however, that horror is not horror directed at the One before whom he stood, but horror against himself, his sin, and his un-holiness standing in the presence of the Most Holy One of Israel.

The LORD was seated in the place of judgment, with His glory all around Him: filling the Temple courts behind Him, and filling the whole of creation. Isaiah saw no advocate to stand in his defense. Instead of standing before the throne boldly as we might expect, Isaiah's soul quaked and quivered as he was confronted by and convicted of his own sin and the terrible knowledge of all Israel's sin. Isaiah stood before the judgment seat, guilty, and he knew it; he had no defense or excuse to offer. He did not deserve any grace, or mercy, or merit any forgiveness, he only deserved condemnation and destruction; he and all his people. **This is the point which we believers in Christ Jesus all too often forget or minimize, to our spiritual peril; that is us too! We only deserve destruction.** The author of Hebrews reminds us of this,

“For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.” It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Hebrews 10:30-31 ESV).

We are saved by faith in Christ, we have been redeemed, and we still will stand in the judgment and give an account for our works and deeds (Matthew 25:31-46; 2 Corinthians 5:10; 2 Thessalonians 1:5-12; Hebrews 9:27-28; Revelation 20:11-15) The Apostle Peter also reminds us,

“For it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?” (1 Peter 4:17 ESV).

We must not forget that we do not merit forgiveness or His love, lest we cheapen His grace and mercy. While we live, we are sinful people, every one of us. None of us are good and none of us can measure up to the LORD's expected standard of holiness and holy living (Deuteronomy 7:6; Romans 3:12)! What arrogance, what gall we possess in our hearts to think that we should be allowed to come here into this church, into this house of worship, which is merely an echo, of a shadow, of the truth, the true heavenly Temple of the LORD in which Isaiah stood before the Throne! How dare we?!

Thanks, and praises be for the Grace of God in Jesus Christ! There is hope for **when** we stand before that throne, we will be standing there just like Isaiah, in reverent fear. Even the angels, the seraphim flying around the Throne, which are greater than us quake, quiver, and proclaim the LORD's holiness, while humbly covering their faces and feet.

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!” (6:3b)

Matthew Henry (the English non-conformist and early Presbyterian) wrote in his commentary, remarking, “The zeal and fervency of the angels in praising God; they even want words [meaning they lack the words] to express themselves, and therefore repeat the same again...The superlative excellence of God's holiness, above that of the purest creatures. He is holy, thrice holy, infinitely holy, originally, perfectly, and eternally so.” I ask you, if the angels respond to the LORD's holiness in such a manner, then how much more so must we, as we are so far below those most pure creatures? How dare we seek entrance into His holy presence?

What the angels proclaim and tell us, what Isaiah saw before him, is that the holiness and glory of God is inescapable, the whole earth and the whole of creation is filled with His divine presence. We cannot hide from it, we cannot hide ourselves from His face, or His judgment. We have no fig leaf to cover our sin and wickedness; no human endeavor, craft or work could ever allow us to stand before His throne and not be convicted. No matter how good, or bad, or evil a person is, or believes themselves to be, **all our righteousness and personal holiness** is simply unholy, apart from God's grace.

How does the world respond to His holy presence? It tries to put God in a box: confine Him to a tent, a Tabernacle, a Temple, to our church buildings. How often do we act, through-out our lives, as if God is only inside here, is only Lord of “inside here”? **The infinite cannot and will not be constrained by the finite; no creation can contain the Holy Creator!**

Isaiah knew this in that moment. He experienced this and felt the full force of his guilt and unholiness, knowing just what the judgment against him should be. No mere Temple sacrifice of animals could truly remove or atone for his sin or the sins of the people; an animal substitute could not satisfy the LORD's justice: man did the crime, so a Man must do the time.

This experience before the Throne destroyed Isaiah's senses of self: his self-righteousness, his selfishness, his self-centeredness; it purged him, for the moment at least, of the idolatry of self which every one of us lapse into instead of worshiping the true LORD. Therefore, he cried out,

“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!” (6:5b)

But God. Two of my favorite words when put together. But God.

But Isaiah was not brought before the Throne to be destroyed, though he was being convicted. He was brought there to receive a message for God’s people, to remember just WHO the LORD is, WHAT His character is, and to give them hope in His mercy and grace.

Following his confession of sinfulness, one of the seraphim brought fire from the altar and touched Isaiah’s lips saying,

“Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.” (6:7b)

Isaiah’s guilt was removed by the angel. He was purified and sanctified by the LORD’s will; he received the grace and mercy of Christ, by the spiritual work of the Holy Spirit applied through the flame.

However, Isaiah does not record seeing our Great High Priest in the heavenly Temple advocating for him (But, I mean, who could blame him? Who could look away from the Ancient of Days?), God the Son was surely there. The burning coal, carried by the seraphim, purged him with the eternal effectiveness of the cross, applying Christ’s atoning work for the forgiveness of his sin (yet to be done in *kronos*/time but still effective in this *Kairos*/moment). The flames purified him for his mission, granting him his life instead of his deserved annihilation; they regenerated and sanctified him in that moment of time (Malachi 3:2-3; Titus 2:14). Isaiah was “born again”, born of the Spirit, born from above, in that moment.

This encounter with the LORD must have seemed both a blessing and a curse to Isaiah, much like Saul on the road to Damascus; it set both men on the course for their whole ministries. Unfortunately for us, it has become all too common within our modern, evangelical, American Christian culture to expect, prize or demand such a glorious transformative event or story of our conversion to prove to others that **we** are “born again” (although truly, our moment of regeneration is as momentous for us as it is uniquely personal); however, this extraordinary transformation is not the norm per sacred Scripture. This desire is driven by many people wanting a moment, or to share in a moment whereby they feel as if they chose Jesus instead of Jesus choosing them; they want to participate in their salvation, to reduce the sovereignty of God and His grace in their lives, by elevating their own authority and effort in their salvation. Isaiah’s encounter before the throne should dissuade everyone from that perspective; the dead cannot save themselves, the guilty cannot undo their crimes. The unholy cannot make themselves holy; the sinful cannot make themselves sinless; the dirty cannot clean their filth off of themselves, muddy hands only smear the mud around, without outside help. A quote, often attributed to Jonathan Edwards, reminds us that, “You contribute nothing to your salvation except the sin which made it necessary.”

- Isaiah was called up, summoned to the heavenly court. He did not ask to go, he was called.
- Isaiah was confronted by the holy glory of the LORD. His sinfulness was assaulted by the LORD's holiness; he had no choice but to confess his sin as he could not justify himself.
- Isaiah was shown unmerited grace and favor by the King of all, as his (Isaiah's) sin was atoned for and his guilt was removed, without any action on his part.
- This is all the sole, sovereign work of the LORD.

Anticipating divine condemnation and his own personal destruction, Isaiah was remorseful and repentant despite having no reason to expect forgiveness or mercy; what he experienced was the conviction of sin, by the Holy Spirit. He did not try to bargain with God or make excuses. He did not pledge to offer more sacrifices, or live better going forward, if only God would turn aside His holy wrath. No, what he did was confess his own sinfulness and unrighteousness, then he waited for justice to be done; but, instead of justice he received mercy, because of the cross. Then he was sent to proclaim the Good News of the LORD's grace and mercy, because of the Messiah, God's suffering servant to come.

Now, when you look upon the cross what do you see? Do you see two pieces of wood (or metal) put together simply as a symbol, or a memorial? Or, do you envision the Son of Man and Son of God high and lifted up, enthroned as the object of our faith and devotion (John 3)? Do you see the Holy One of Israel offering you grace, mercy, and forgiveness? The Jews, Scribes, and Pharisees (those people who should have known better), didn't see Jesus that way but the Centurion who executed Christ did: witnessing the sun hide its' face, and as Matthew also tells us the earth shook, and rocks were split open; **him** (the Centurion) being filled with awe seeing how Christ died; he declared "*Truly this man was the Son of God!*" (Mark 15:39), "Son of God" was a title reserved by the Romans for **their** lord of the world, for the "divine" Caesar. A man, scourged and bloody, executed in the worst manner allowable, was recognized and proclaimed by an ignorant pagan as the Holy God! So, we as professing Christians have no excuse but to see Him!

When you look upon Christ **in faith and devotion**, do you see the Holy One who is in position to condemn (Romans 8:34), yet who instead forgives you of all your sin, by the covering of His Blood? Do you "get" the power of His Holy Love? Look upon the crucified Christ and you will see the most beautiful and terrible sight; see our King crucified for your and my sake, because of our sin. **That** sight of holiness will always move the regenerated heart to a posture of repentance, if you only believe. Who can stand and not be moved, seeing Jesus enthroned in glory, Him Who has removed your guilt and covered your sin with His precious Blood, by suffering the judgment and condemnation you deserve?

It is because of our sins and transgressions, because our very nature has been corrupted by sin, that we are the unrighteous, that we are totally depraved, and why we need Christ. We have unclean lips and we dwell in the midst of people with unclean lips (6:5) ...and hearts... and hands... and minds. But, while we were yet sinners, Jesus died so that we may live: the righteous

Holy One <singular> for the unrighteous and unholy many. He has given us His Holy Spirit, granting us the faith and power to believe in Him (Ephesians 2:8-9), sanctifying and saving us with His Holy Blood.

Sanctification hurts, but it is worth it. Our old selves are put to death so that we may be truly raised to new life in Christ Jesus; new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17), a Holy people, and the LORD's treasured possession (1 Peter 2:9). We are given and clothed with Christ's righteousness; we are identified with the holiness of Christ because of the Incarnation, because God the Son identified Himself with us, taking on our flesh to be numbered among us transgressors (Isaiah 53:12, Luke 22:37), so that by His stripes we may be healed (Isaiah 53:5). The Holy Spirit's work of sanctification, His work to make us Holy, His work to conform us to the Image of Christ, His work in us may hurt, it will hurt, but it hurts a whole lot less than we deserve; far less than how our sin offends God's absolute standard of holiness; far less than Christ suffered for us.

Remember, we were created to be holy like our Father in Heaven. Again, and again in Scripture, the LORD says, "...*be holy, for I am holy...*" (Leviticus 11:44-45, 19:2, 20:7, 20:26; Deuteronomy 7:6, 14:2, 23:14, 26:19; Matthew 5:48). We were given His Holy Law, the Torah, to obey so that we might live holy lives (Numbers 15:40), but the knowledge of law only increased our sin, and our knowledge of our personal un-holiness and yet, the more sin, the greater the grace that was poured out for us (Romans 5:20). Why? Because the LORD promised to make us holy, by the work of Christ (Isaiah 4:3-4), because we were each chosen by Him to be His holy people from before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4). Now we are declared to be holy, holy in Christ.

Jesus has rescued us from our worst nature, from our worst selves, in love, to be holy, for His eternal glory. Because of the cross, we will stand together, next to Isaiah, before the Throne, and receive mercy, because as the author of Hebrews writes,

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." (Hebrews 10:19-23 ESV)

God the Son, Jesus Christ, has chosen us to be His holy people. The Holy Spirit sanctifies us, conforming us to become holy individuals, so that together as the Church, the Bride of Christ shall be presented to Him "*bright and pure*" (Revelation 19:8), totally holy and no longer depraved.

Back to the question I asked at the beginning of our time today, "Why is Isaiah still so important for us as Believers?"; Isaiah is still important because he helps to keep our hearts and minds focused on this central point upon which all of redemptive history turns: God is Holy and we are not. This is the core reason for the entire life, death, resurrection, and enthronement of Jesus

Christ: we were made “Very Good”, except we sinned and became separated from God; so, Jesus came to “clean us up”, to clothe us with His righteousness and His Holiness; so that we are now restored to a right relationship with our Father in heaven, as His beloved adopted children.

Therefore, I want you to remember this: whenever you look upon the cross, when you consider and meditate on God’s holiness and are confronted by your own personal un-holiness, do not lose hope and do not despair because of what you have done. Yes, not a one of us are worthy or “good enough” to stand without fear before the LORD, but God our Father and Jesus our Brother loves you (and me) so much that Jesus died for you, to make you holy, to justify you and bring you into relationship with them.

If you believe, then you have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Let that belief drive you into the world to do good works. Let the holiness of God bring you to repentance, bring us all to repentance, so that we may respond to His love with the twin arms of Evangelism (sharing the Good News about what Christ has done for us, telling of His saving grace to those who might otherwise suffer His wrath) and Missions (serving as the hands and feet of Christ by bringing His love to others); then, as we progressively live more obediently and serve Him, we will be grown into holiness by the Power of the Holy Spirit. We will then live in a manner which glorifies God in all things.

So, do not let the world drag you back down into the muck and mire of sin, now that you have been raised up and washed clean. Yes, even when you slip or step into a muddy sin puddle, take heart because you have been washed in something far better than RainX on your windshield, coated with something better than Teflon, the Blood of Jesus Christ. So, repent, believe, and know that those sins are forgiven too. You are made to be holy, so live holy, because our Father in heaven is Holy, then all that you do will be for His glory: today, tomorrow, and for all eternity.

The LORD is Holy, so be Holy, in Christ Jesus.

AMEN