

Isaiah 6:1-13  
A Vision of the Most Holy  
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In our passage for today, Isaiah shares with us this account of the vision he experienced at the very beginning of his ministry. God sent this visionary revelation to Isaiah to call him as a divinely inspired prophet. This vision occurred in the year of the death of King Uzziah, the king who had ruled the southern kingdom of Judah for some 52 years. King Uzziah had begun his reign over Judah about a year after King Jeroboam II began his long reign over the northern kingdom of Israel. During the forty years when King Uzziah reigned in the south and King Jeroboam II reigned in the north, the two kingdoms were at peace. Both extended their borders and prospered in terms of material wealth. Then King Jeroboam II died, and the northern kingdom began its quick decline. It fell to the Assyrians only about thirty years after the death of King Jeroboam II. King Uzziah reigned thirteen years after the death of King Jeroboam II. After King Uzziah's death, the slower decline of Judah began. The southern kingdom would fall to the Babylonians about 164 years after the death of King Uzziah. Isaiah was called to minister during this period of decline which was a one way street toward a coming divine judgment. To sustain Isaiah through these difficult days, God gave the prophet a vision of God's holiness. We may be able to survive with a superficial understanding of God's holiness during prosperous times and healthy times and easy times. When life becomes difficult,

challenging, hard, we need deep roots in order to persevere, roots which draw sustaining support from a deep understanding of God's sovereignty and holiness.

We will look at Isaiah's vision this morning under four headings: Revelation, Repentance, Redemption and Recruitment.

First, we will look at **Revelation**, the revelation of God's glory in the vision. Isaiah saw, we read, but this was a visionary seeing. We read that Isaiah saw the Lord in the temple, and we read about the taking of a coal from the altar of incense. We don't know if the temple here is a reference to the earthly temple in Jerusalem, or a reference to the heavenly temple, which is the original which provided the pattern for its earthly counterpart. Most likely Isaiah was physically in neither, and this was a vision the Lord brought to the mind of the prophet to see with his inner eye. The reference to the temple here was a reminder that God dwelt among His people and that God was near to them in a special covenantal sense.

Isaiah saw the Lord seated on a throne. As you know, the ark of the covenant was the throne of God in the Holy of Holies in the temple in Jerusalem. God in His Shekinah Glory dwelt between the two cherubim on the cover of the ark. God here appears to Isaiah not as the Shekinah Glory but in a human form. Isaiah sees the Lord, but the Bible repeatedly says that no one can look upon the Lord and live. No creature has ever directly looked upon God. No creature can see the invisible spirit essence of God which exists in the eternal beyond the creaturely realm of

space and time. God appeared to Isaiah clothed not with impenetrable light but with a kingly robe. God appeared to Isaiah in a human form which Isaiah could look upon, a form which in an indirect manner manifested a true revelation of the glory of the living and true God. The Gospel of John tells us that in this vision, Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus and spoke of Him.

John 12:41

41 These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him.

Of course, God the Son did not unite with a full human nature in the mystery of the Incarnation until His conception in the womb of the Virgin Mary, but the Second Person of the Godhead here revealed Himself to Isaiah in a visionary human form. This visionary human form may even have looked like the future human appearance of Jesus of Nazareth; we are not told. What we are told is that the Son of God appeared to Isaiah in the form of a king priest who ruled and judged from His throne in the temple. He was high and lifted up, symbolizing His sovereign authority over all creation. His regal robe filled the temple, symbolizing that He exercised total sovereignty. There was no room for another in this place of divine authority. Above Him was a chorus of angelic attendants, the Seraphim; literally, the burning ones. These angelic creatures had a glory all their own as evidenced by their name. They were sinless, pure angelic beings, ministers of fire with an awesome glowing presence that radiated with angelic majesty. And yet the glory of Almighty God surpasses the glory of these majestic angelic creatures infinitely more than the glory of the sun surpasses the glory of

the glow worm. At night in the absence of the sun, we see the beauty of the stars and the planets and the moon. At night, even the lowly lightning bug can display its glory for our admiration. But in the daytime we can see none of these because of the brightness of the sun. Even so, the burning angels of heaven are less than mere insects before the glorious majesty of God.

Each Seraph, we read, had six wings. With two, each Seraph covered his face. Even these fiery angels cannot gaze directly upon the dazzling brightness of Jehovah's face, not even in this human form. They are like a man who wishes to look at the sun in its full brightness on a summer day. If a man is to gaze at the sun, he cannot look at it directly. He must use some sort of filtering device to protect his eyes, some instrument such as a darkly shaded piece of glass whose paradoxical purpose is to hide the sun so that the sun can be safely seen. Even so, these angels use their wings to veil the brightness of God's glory so that they can look upon Him in worshipful adoration.

With two wings, each Seraph covered his feet. The angels covered the lower part of their body as an expression of creaturely modesty before the great Creator God. This was a symbolic expression that before God, the mighty angel is as nothing and totally unworthy.

With two wings, each Seraph flew. They were ever ready to do God's bidding. They were active servants ever available to execute God's holy will. And so we pray for God's will to be done on earth even as it is done in heaven. No adoration is complete or sincere that does not combine with it an availability

for active service, a willingness to do God's holy will. God's servants must combine the veneration of worship with the vigor of obedient service.

As an aside, let me mention the contrast of this vision with the humiliation of Christ. Here the Seraphim serve the Lord, the Son of God in a pre-incarnate form. In His humiliation, Jesus came not to be served but to serve. Here the Seraphim in modesty cover their feet before the presence of the Lord. In His humiliation, Jesus washed the dirt from His disciples feet as an example of humble service. Here the Seraphim do not look upon the Lord with unveiled eyes. In His humiliation, Jesus allowed His enemies to look upon Him as He was mocked and scorned and hung on the shameful and painful Roman cross.

Let us go on with our examination of this vision. The Seraphim cried to one another a chorus: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" They sang this heavenly hymn with such power that the booming reverberations shook the massive stone portals of the temple. In their hymn, they glorified the Lord for His holiness, that elemental divine attribute which affects all the other divine attributes. Without holiness, patience and longsuffering degenerate into undue indulgence like a mother who is overly lenient with her children. Without holiness, love and mercy become unstable sentimentality. Apart from holiness, power and majesty become arbitrary tyranny. Apart from holiness, wisdom becomes subtle slyness. God's longsuffering is a holy longsuffering. God's love is a holy love. God's power is a holy power. God's wisdom is a holy wisdom.

Holy means special, unique, separate. The holy is unique as an original one-of-a-kind painting by a master is unique compared to common three-color printed reproductions that are a dime a dozen. The holy is special as a flawless diamond is special compared to glass costume jewelry. The holy is separate and apart as an all powerful monarch is in a class apart from the lowliest of his subjects.

When we think of holy, we primarily think of total separation from sin. And, of course, that is the only way in which we can seek to be holy, by separating ourselves from sinful living. But God is holy in an even more basic sense, holy and apart in an even more fundamental way that is impossible for any created being. That is why God is holy even to the sinless Seraphim. God is holy is that He alone is eternal, beyond the categories of space and time, beyond the limitations of all creaturely dimensions. No human or angel can penetrate the eternal and look upon God directly. To use the language of Scripture, God is clothed with unapproachable light. God is truly transcendent, truly other, truly beyond us. God alone is eternal in this uniquely transcendent sense.

God is also unique as the one Being who is not created, who always has been, whose existence is not derived from another nor dependent upon another for its continuance. God is, but God never became, for God always has been.

The angels cry out “Holy, holy, holy” to this transcendent God who will later reveal Himself more clearly as existing in three Persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and who even in this

vision refers to Himself both as “I” and “Us.” (Look at verse 8 where the Lord says, “Whom shall *I* send, and who will go for *Us*?”) The question is, How can any finite creature know this thrice holy eternal God? The next verse of the angelic hymn gives the answer: “The whole earth is full of His glory.” God can speak to us about Himself and reveal eternal truths to us because God has created this whole universe of space and time such that it reflects on a creaturely plane the glory of His eternal Being. That is the ultimate purpose of created reality: to reflect and proclaim the glory of God. And thus God is able to speak to us in terms of this finite world in which we live and to communicate to us truth about Himself. We may see as through a mirror darkly, but we do see. We may behold only the hindermost part of God's glory from the cleft in the rock, but we do behold. We cannot see the passing of time, but we can look at the hands of a clock and learn the time of day. Time is invisible, we cannot see it, but the hands of the clock can tell us something about time. God is invisible and we cannot look directly upon Him, but the whole of creation reflects the glory of God and the Bible reveals His truth in human language.

Let us go now to our second point, **Repentance**. The prophet observes this angelic worship, and he wants to join in the praise of the living and true God. He yearns to join his voice with theirs in their doxology. But he cannot, for the prophet stands before God not merely as a creature before the Creator but as a sinner before the pure and jealous God who by no means clears the guilty. The prophet is of that rebellious race of Adam who joined with that angelic outlaw Satan and sought to take for himself divine prerogatives which belong uniquely to God. At

Satan's prompting, Adam sought to be like God in a way forbidden to any creature. Adam sought to decide for himself what is good and what is evil, and to look to himself as the final measure of what is right and what is wrong. This is the essence of sin. It is the ultimate mutiny, a rebellion against legitimate divine authority.

Sin cuts the creature off from the Creator. Satan said such a severance would be independence but instead it proved to be iniquity. Satan said it would be freedom but instead it turned all of life into futility. Satan said it would lead to dignity, but instead it led to death.

Isaiah cries out, "Woe is me! I am undone. I am cut off from the Holy One by my sin and am doomed to die! 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." There is nothing that reveals to us our sinfulness and the seriousness of our transgressions and the filthiness of our iniquities as does a glimpse of the glory of God. Isaiah wants to offer His praise and worship to God, but He recognizes that He is morally polluted, and His praise will rise to God not as a sweet smelling savor but as a stench. The very vision which inspires his desire to worship also reveals his unworthiness to do so.

That brings us to our third point, which is **Redemption**. We read that the temple was filled with the smoke of sweet smelling incense, representing the worship and prayerful praise ascending up to God. This incense was coming from a heated stone on the altar of incense. Incense was put upon this heated stone, and

there it burned and went up before God. Incense was burned on this altar morning and evening, and this altar was sprinkled yearly with the blood of atonement.

One of the Seraphim, an angel here representing Jesus in his role as the Messenger of the Covenant, took this hot stone from the altar of incense and touched it to the lips of Isaiah. There are many metaphors in Scripture for forgiveness and deliverance from sin, and one of them is purgation, the purging, the burning away of sin and iniquity.

As the born again people of God, we too have an inner desire to worship God and to bring before Him our prayers and praise. We have the same problem that Isaiah had. Though in this life Jesus delivers us from the dominating power of sin in our lives, we still have to wrestle with the continuing presence of indwelling sin. That indwelling sin pollutes all our worship, all our praise, all our prayers. Jesus as our High Priest takes the incense of our worship and touches it to the hot stone of His atoning merit based upon His suffering upon the cross. He purges away the sin which clings to our worship, and it ascends before God as a sweet smelling savor totally freed from any polluting stench.

Let's now consider our last point, which is **Recruitment**. The prophet was purged for a purpose. God has a difficult mission. He wants someone to proclaim His message of warning to the nation during this period when very few would listen because their hearts were hardened. God in judgment was not going to intervene to take out hearts of stone. God in judgment was not

going to intervene by opening blinded eyes nor by unstopping deaf ears. The people will hear without hearing. The people will see without seeing. Yet, for the sake of His glory, God wants His message preached. This is a hard but necessary task. God asks, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?” The prophet cries out, “Here am I! Send me.” The prophet focuses not on the difficulty of the task nor its unpleasantness but on the opportunity to bring God glory.

God tells Isaiah that there will be no wide spread repentance in the land until after the national judgment has been executed. The prophet will not live to see the day of revival which will later result in the return of exiles from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. Yet He is willing to do this hard task because it is his assignment in life from God, the divinely appointed task to be done for the outworking of God’s plan for history and for the ultimate glory of God. God assures Isaiah that He will preserve a righteous remnant within the nation, like the life of a tree remaining in its stump after it has been cut down. The tree of Judah will be cut down in judgment, but new life will sprout from the stump. There is still a future for the covenant people, and there is coming a Branch, a Shoot from the rod of Jesse, the Messiah, who will accomplish the work of the covenant and fulfill the promises made to Abraham.

Beloved, we should look at this visionary experience at the calling of Isaiah to his ministry as a touchstone to what we should anticipate each Lord’s Day as we assemble with the people of God for worship. We should come together for worship so that we can join with the angelic hosts and the

church triumphant in the worship of the living and true God. As we worship, we get a glimpse of the glory of God, and this makes us aware with a renewed sensitivity that we are sinners. We must then look to Jesus to purge away our sins, to cleanse our worship and our service to make them acceptable to God. And from our encounter with Jesus, our faith will be strengthened such that when God says, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”, we will cry out with excited anticipation, “Here am I! Send me.” We should leave our time of worship with a strengthened faith and with a renewed determination to live for the glory of God, even when our assigned lot and task are difficult, even when the fruit of our labor will not be harvested until a future generation.