

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)*

Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD God Almighty

I went to a unique college. It was a very small college in a little town in Wisconsin called Northwestern College – not to be confused with the Big Ten university by the same name. It was an all male school. Everyone there was studying to be a pastor. Because we were this small, all male school devoted to arcane things like learning Greek and Hebrew, the languages that the Bible was written in, we were known for having a certain personality. Some people didn't appreciate it because it had a kind of us against the world flavor to it. Since we were young men with lots of energy, we could be a little loud. That really came out at sporting events. When we hosted a basketball game, we could make the gymnasium ring with shouts. You couldn't hear yourself talk. We didn't have girls, so we made a bunch of guys our cheerleaders and those guys made up a whole bunch of cheers that you'd never hear anywhere else. Sometimes, they were repetitive. We would shout the team name or whatever point we were making over and over again until it drowned out all other sound in the gym. I think cheering can help us understand the picture in our text for this morning. It's not a basketball game. But sporting events aren't the only times people cheer. Political events and rallies and marches all include repetitive cheering for the person or cause that people have gathered for. Today, the people cheering aren't people at all. They're angels. They're cheering, **“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”** Their cheering rolls like thunder and shakes the very temple of God in heaven. It tells us that God is holy, he's set apart from us and our sinful existence. God is perfect and far above all that makes this world dark and evil. We want to echo that cheer this morning. **Holy, holy, holy is the LORD God Almighty.**

I.

What happened in this reading was a vision. God allowed Isaiah to see his great council in heaven. The Lord was seated in the temple on a great, high throne and the train of robe filled the temple. Angels soared above him on wings and cried out that great “holy, holy, holy”. How would you react to seeing that? Ever since I was a child, I've dreamed of seeing Jesus. Wouldn't it be a treat for God to show us a vision like this? Well, Isaiah didn't think so. When he saw all this, he cried out, **“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.”** The Hebrew word translated as “ruined” here really means destroyed. It means that he will come to a violent end. Why? Because he has seen the LORD. **The LORD is too holy for any sinner to stand in his presence.**

The Old Testament declares that no man can see the LORD and live. Why is that true? Isaiah tells us: “I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips.” In the Old Testament, to be clean really didn't have anything to do with whether you needed a bath. It was ritual cleanness or uncleanness. If someone was ceremonially unclean, they could not come into the temple. They could not offer sacrifices or worship the

Lord. They had to stay outside until they were cleansed. That ritual or ceremonial uncleanness was a symbol. God used it to teach a deeper truth, one that Isaiah clearly understood: sin. When he says that he is a man of unclean lips, he doesn't mean that he's been eating pork or some other unclean food or that he's been in contact with a dead body or any of the other things that made Jewish people unclean. He means that with his words he has made himself spiritually unclean. He has sinned in what he has spoken. And it's not just him that's guilty. His whole people are guilty of sinning in what they say. So he deserves to die.

My friends, is it any different with us? How often don't our words make us unclean? How many unkind things have we said just this past week? How many times have we lied or left out information that would make us look bad? How much profanity has crossed our lips? All that is sin. Certainly, taking God's name in vain or advocating unscriptural doctrines makes our lips unclean to God. But even beyond that, any time that our words betray that we are thinking like our society thinks instead of like God thinks, we are guilty. We speak what comes out of our hearts and all too often what comes out is sinful arrogance and self-righteousness. And just as much as Isaiah, we live among a people of unclean lips, a people that doesn't think twice about filthy language or using God's name in the most horrible ways, a people that denies what God says every single day. We are guilty. And like Isaiah we deserve to die and to spend eternity in hell. If we stood in the presence of God, we would be terrified, because we could not help but see how sinful we are and how holy he is and how his holiness must destroy us and our sin.

But God didn't let Isaiah die for his sin. One of those angels flew to him holding a hot coal from the altar with tongs. The altar in Israelite worship wasn't a table like ours is. It was a place where sacrifices were burned – sometimes whole animals completely burned up. You can imagine it took a pretty hot fire to make that happen. That coal from the place of sacrifice touched Isaiah's lips and the angel said, “**Your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.**” Now, notice, Isaiah doesn't say one word about it hurting. In fact, a few minutes after this live coal touches his lips, he's shouting. This is a vision. But that coal from the place of sacrifice has the power to remove his guilt. It has the power to atone for his sin, to pay what that sin owes God. How can that be?

Because the coal from the altar represents Christ. He offered his life to pay for our sins. His sacrifice removes all the guilt of our lips and our lives. It atones for us, it pays what we owe God for our sins. So now, when God looks at us, he doesn't see all the horrible, sinful things that have spewed out of our mouths. He doesn't see the sin in our hearts that caused those sinful words anymore. He sees us as holy and perfect and so we will not die when we do enter his presence. We will live. That's what the all holy God wants to happen.

II.

That holy God is deeply concerned about us. That Lord on that exalted throne whose robe filled the temple and whose angels made it shake with their praise, that Lord turns his attention to us, his people. He sees the world in all its darkness and sin and death and he reaches out to us. **The LORD is too holy to let his people die.**

Right after God took Isaiah's sin away, the Lord asked, “**Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?**” God was asking for a volunteer to serve as a messenger to his people. What did God want his people to know? He wanted them to hear the message of life. They were drowning in sin and rebellion against him. They were drifting farther and farther away. God was going to send a messenger to call them to repent, to warn them of the disaster that sin leads to and the hell that it deserves. But that wouldn't be all of Isaiah's message. God wanted them to know of his love and forgiveness, that he would atone for their sins by sending his Son to die. In the book of Isaiah, God would lay out his plan for thousands of years to come, a plan that included Jesus being born in Bethlehem and dying outside Jerusalem and rising again to give us life. And that plan included God sending messengers not just to Israel, but to the ends of the earth so that people all over the world can hear that good news and know their Savior. That Lord on his throne in heaven was going to control all the history of all the world so that Jesus would be born and so that the message of his love and forgiveness reached the ends of the earth. You and I are here today because God the Father continues to make that plan happen.

To make sure we know the plan, God gave a prophet. God had Isaiah stand in his councils and hear his truth so that he could proclaim an authentic, authoritative word. God did that with the whole Bible, Old Testament and New, so that we could be a part of his plan to save the world. God continued to give prophets and apostles until that word was complete. Now, God calls pastors and teachers to proclaim that good news so that we, his people, will live with him forever.

III.

When Isaiah heard God's question, he leaped forward to volunteer. He went from "**Woe is me! I'm ruined!**" to "**Here am I! Send me!**" in about 60 seconds. Isaiah wanted to take God's message. He wanted to do it even though it was going to be hard. If you read on in the next verses, you'll see that God didn't promise him an easy time or an easy message. He was going to announce judgment to a hardhearted and unfaithful people. Rarely would they thank him for that. He was going to live through scary times. He would even live to see Jerusalem under siege from a foreign army. But he wanted to run with God's message. He wanted to be that prophet who announces the counsels of God. Why?

Because he understood what it meant to be forgiven. He understood what it meant to deserve death and destruction and have God do the impossible to save him for no other reason than his love. Where did Isaiah get that understanding? Not from himself. He didn't make a decision to follow God. He didn't have a purer heart than we do. God atoned for his sins. When God showed him that with that symbolic burning coal, God changed his heart. God gave him faith in Jesus who hadn't even come yet. The Holy Spirit filled him with a desire to run with that message. And that same Holy Spirit is still working today. The message about Jesus is the most powerful force on this earth. It changes hearts. It makes believers out of unbelievers. It gives hope and joy where before there was only pain and despair. That message about Jesus gives us faith and makes us want to run with that good news, too. **The LORD is too holy to leave our hearts unmoved.**

God does it all for us. That's really what we're celebrating today. Today is a special Sunday of the church year. It's the Festival of Holy Trinity. Today we're celebrating the fact that God reveals himself to us as one God in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God the Father made the world and he still runs it so that his eternal plan to save us comes true. God the Son made himself man and sacrificed his life to pay for all the sins of all the world. We usually call him Jesus. God the Holy Spirit works through the gospel and changes our hearts so that we believe and so that we live a new and holy life. That God is holy, holy, holy. In this Old Testament account, God gave a hint of what we today call the Holy Trinity. God showed that he was too holy to leave us to die. His holiness demanded that our sins be punished, but also that the God of love reach out for us and save us. The festival of Holy Trinity is really a celebration of how God did all that we need so that we will live for him.

Today is also our graduation Sunday. Today we're celebrating the fact that God has given us a school where we can teach our children that good news. The number one thing that Peace Lutheran School exists to do is point to that holy God who loved us and saved us. God sent us to do that. May the hearts of the children we serve be moved by that gospel to run with his message, too. Amen.