

“The Holiness of God”

Isaiah 6:1-8

Festival of the Holy Trinity, May 31, 2015

I love to sing that hymn, don't you? **“Holy, holy, holy, LORD God almighty;” early in the morning our song shall rise to thee! Holy, holy, holy, merciful and mighty! God in three Persons blessed Trinity!”**

The words to this lovely hymn were written by an **Anglican priest** in the **Church of England** in the **early 19th Century, around 1820**; but unfortunately their author, **Father Reginald Heber** simply took that piece of paper, upon which they were written, and stuck it in his desk drawer. There these words sat unread by anyone else for the next five or six years; never read by anyone else until **Father Reginald Heber had been called by the Triune God to his truest home in heaven above.**

After Father Heber's death, his dutiful wife and grieving widow was going about the necessary task of **cleaning out her husband's study.** That's when she found this piece of paper lodged in his desk drawer. Soon after making this discovery, she handed this piece of paper to a man who had been a good friend of her husband's, and her friend also for many years; a man who had served as a **church organist from the time he was 10 years old**, and who was presently serving as the **President of the Cambridge University Musical Society.**

Thirty minutes later, historians tell us, **John Dykes, the named of this great musical composer** emerged from the room with this tune in hand that we also sang as our Hymn of the Day. The name of the tune is **Nicaea** in honor of that place called Nicaea, where the **Nicene Creed was first written by the earthly Church fathers in defense** of the doctrine of the **HOLY TRINITY back in 325 AD.**

Today being Trinity Sunday I was hoping that you and I might spend some time together talking about the holiness of God. **First of all, what is the holiness of God? Secondly, what is the reaction of sinful human beings when they are confronted with the holiness of God? And thirdly, how has God made it possible for us to become the possessors of his own holiness, yet today, in order that we might live with him not only in this life, but also in with him in heaven forever?**

1. First of all, what is the Holiness of God?

Unfortunately, the word “holy,” when it often used by people in the world today is used to express a totally different concept than the one which the Bible reveals to us. Sometimes, people today use the word only to express some type of **profound personal astonishment** or **absolute amazement** they are experiencing on their part! You know, how people sometimes say such ridiculous things, and perhaps even blasphemous things, as some etymologists contend as: **“holy schmoly,”** or **“holy mackeral,”** or even **“holy smokes!”**

But when the Bible uses the word “holy” is it speaking always about one of the chief characteristics and primary attributes of the Triune God: Indicating that the LORD God Almighty always sits in a class all by himself. To speak about the **“holiness of God”** is to speak about the **“complete otherness”** of God! For God to be holy means that he is **“distinct”** and he is **“separate”** and far superior to any other living beings that he ever created and **far more superior also to anything inanimate** that he may have created also; such things as **the sun, and the moon, and the stars; and the whole universe for that matter!**

The Hebrew word for **“holy” is “kadosh;”** coming from another ancient word that meant **“to cut,”** or **“to separate.”** Perhaps an even more accurate would be the phrase **“a cut above something.”** Like today when we find a **garment or another piece of merchandise that is**

outstanding and that has a superior excellence attached to it; we may use the phrase that: **“It is a cut above the rest!”**

To say that God is holy means that he is uniquely holy. He has **no rivals or competition.**

To say that God is holy is to say that he is so far above and beyond us that he seems totally foreign to us. In **Exodus 15:11**, Moses asks the question: **“Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness; awesome in splendor, doing wonders?”**

To say that God is holy means that he is morally pure and righteous. He always does the right thing and never does the wrong things and the things that he does are always intentional, even as there are some things that he refrains from doing, on his part, that are intentional also, but always right and good!

Friends, the words of our **Old Testament lesson today are about the call of God to Isaiah to become a prophet to his people** and a prophet in the Old Testament context was not only a man who **spoke forth the Word of God to God’s people**, but also served often times in the capacity of what you and I might call a **“whistleblower” today.**

If you were to read the first five chapters of Isaiah it would become abundantly clear to you that the Prophet Isaiah functioned both like a preacher and a whistleblower. Isaiah would say such things as: **“The LORD has spoken: ‘Children I have reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel does not know me! My people do not understand!’ My children are people who deal corruptly, who have forsaken the LORD, who have despised the Holy One of Israel, and are utterly estranged!” (Isaiah 1:2-4).** --- But even among all of those many harsh statements of judgment that God had given the Prophet Isaiah to pronounce upon his people, there are also those great glimmers of God’s light; **THE LIGHT OF GOD’S REDEMPTION SPOKEN TO THEM AS WELL.** In **Isaiah 1:18-20**, we hear God also speaking through the Prophet Isaiah when he says: **“Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD, though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. Though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient you shall eat the good of the land! But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken!”**

Brothers and sisters, this young man named Isaiah, the son of Amoz, was sitting in the temple in Jerusalem one day, shortly after the death of King Uzziah, who had for the most part been a good and righteous king and who had brought a great deal of stability to his nation during his 52 year reign (2 Chronicles 26). Why just think about this for a moment: In the last 52 years in our nation there have been 10 different Presidents who have lived in the White House in our country. So quite naturally, when King Uzziah died, it was a time of national mourning. Perhaps, Isaiah, like many other astute people was greatly concerned with what would happen in his nation after their king’s death. Perhaps Isaiah had gone to the temple that day specifically to worship and to pray for the nation and himself. There he went to meet God, but on this particular day God came to meet him in a way that was completely irrefutable. There God met Isaiah and Isaiah saw a heavenly vision.

In the first four verses of our Old Testament lesson, Isaiah tells us all about the GREATNESS OF GOD THAT HE HAD EXPERIENCED IN THE TEMPLE THERE THAT DAY. **“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, they covered their faces. And with two they covered their feet. And with two they 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 as another footnote, please let me share with

you the **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE THREE WORDS OF THE SERAPHIM, "THE FIERY ONES," BEING SUNG OVER AND OVER AGAIN, ANTIPHONALLY TO ONE ANOTHER.** You all remember learning somewhere in the fifth or sixth grade about **the three forms of adjectives as we often uses adjectives in our English language to modify nouns.** There is the **common form of the adjective the comparative form of the adjective, and the superlative form of the adjective.** Sometimes those adjectives sound very much alike: big, bigger, biggest; or small, smaller, smallest; or blue, bluer and bluest. But sometimes the comparative and superlative forms of the adjective are different words altogether: good, better, best!

But in the Hebrew language the way of expressing the superlative form of an adjective is by simply stating the adjective three times in a row. Therefore to say that God is the holiest Being there ever was and that there ever will be, is to say in Hebrew: Holy, holy, holy! Or in Latin, sanctus, sanctus, sanctus!

2. So secondly, what is the reaction of sinful human beings whenever we are confronted with the holiness of God?

The doors of the temple were not the only thing that was rattling and shaking that day! The foundations of thresholds in the temple were not the only thing that was rattling and shaking that day! The whole body of Isaiah also quaked in fear when all of a sudden he realized that he was not being profoundly confronted with God's own unique holiness. In the presence of such a great and overwhelming reality; when Isaiah realizes that he is now seeing the LORD, the reigning Monarch of the Universe on his throne, he bursts out in an agonizing cry in **verse 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!"*

Isaiah's response was not the response that some people may have expected him to say today, who often have no proper sense of what it might mean for a sinful human being to find themselves in full view of the holiness of God! Some today might falsely imagination that one's reaction would be: *"Hey dude, this is really cool!"* Or *"Wow! Would you look at that!"* though Isaiah was no doubt wowed, for sure!

Instead Isaiah said, *"Woe is me! For I am lost!"*

The **Kings James Version** translates that Hebrew adjective that is translated here with the English word "lost," **with the English word "undone."** **To be undone or ruined is to be broken or to come apart at the seams,** to be unloosened. A psychologist would describe the experience as one of personal disintegration; that is, go to pieces. He is fully aware that life has meaning but that he is outside, unable to participate in it.

The reason he is undone and outside of the meaning of life is because he was unclean. When seen next to the purity of God's holiness, the impurity of human sin is overwhelmingly evident. The prophet realizes with sickening force that his character is not in keeping with God any more that the people's character is.

Brothers and sisters, anytime in the Bible that someone gets a glimpse of the glory of Almighty God they are terrified (Luke 1:12; 2:9; Acts 5:19). Why? Because in **Exodus 33:20,** God said, **"No one may see me and live" (John 1:18)!**

The first response of an unholy person to the holiness of God is an acute awareness of their own personal sin. When the unholy confronts the holy we become very conscious of our own sinfulness. When seen next to the purity of God's holiness, the impurity of our human sin is overwhelmingly evident. **This is why I believe that a people who has no sense of their own sinfulness do not have a true sense of the nature of God. Such persons have no awareness of**

how deeply stained they really are. We must be undone before we can be remade. The Holy Spirit has to awaken us to our sinfulness before he can summon us to become the recipients of God's grace!

All of this reminds me of the story of KING FREDERICK II, an eighteenth-century king in Prussia, what is today Germany. He was visiting a prison in Berlin when the inmates crowded around him to proclaim their innocence; all except one man, that is! He sat quietly in the corner, head bowed.

"Frederick walked over to him and said, 'What are you here for?' "'Armed robbery, your majesty,' the man replied.

'Are you guilty?' the king asked.

'Yes sir! I deserve this punishment!'

"The king turned to the guard and ordered, 'Set this guilty man free. I don't want him corrupting all these other innocent people.'"

3. So, my brothers and sisters, how has God made it possible for us to become holy and live with him forever?

Once Isaiah realizes and acknowledges his sin, notice what happens next in verse 7: ***"And the angel touched my mouth with it and said, Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away, and your sin is forgiven; more properly "atoned for."***

We read this and we are prone to say, "Ouch!" The angel takes a hot coal and touched it to Isaiah's mouth. Why? Here God is cauterizing the sin. Perhaps you have been to the Doctor and had something cauterized. Cauterization is the process of sealing a wound or destroying abnormal or infected tissue with a heated instrument. God cauterizes Isaiah's lips. He eliminates the impurity.

Isaiah's guilt is taken away but it is not shrugged off. God doesn't say, "Aw, let's just forget it!" Instead he tells Isaiah that his sin *"is atoned for."* In other words, it was paid for.

How? It was paid for in Jesus. How can that be, you ask? Isaiah lived many hundreds of years before Jesus, but there was still the promise God had made many times and affirmed repeatedly in the Old Testament era. The plan was in place. God forgave Isaiah on the basis of what Christ was going to do hundreds of years later. Just like He is willing to forgive you and I on the basis of what He has done many hundreds of years before us.

Finding God's pardon in our lives begins by admitting our guilt. To insist we are innocent when we are not leaves us in a prison of our own making. Yet when we admit our need, our guilt, God offers us grace and forgiveness.

Imagine, if you could start your life all over today? You can do that by placing your faith in the sacrifice of God's one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

Some of you are feeling like Isaiah this morning, filled with remorse over what you've done wrong, but uncertain of what to do about it. **The way to God isn't by trying harder, or by cleaning up your act. It's by faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross.**

When Jesus the sinless Son of God died on the cross, He paid for our sin. God's justice is satisfied (sin is punished) and He is also able to extend mercy. The reason we are called children of God is not because we are good . . . but because we are forgiven. We are forgiven not because we were among the best of the class but because Christ died for our sin.

AFTER ISAIAH SEES GOD'S MAJESTY AND IS CONFRONTED WITH HIS SIN, FINDS FORGIVENESS THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF CHRIST, HE THEN IS COMMISSIONED BY GOD. When the forgiveness of sin is experienced, a loving response to God follows, as we see in verse 8. ***"Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"***

Now, for the first time, God speaks. It is as if Isaiah was not ready to hear God before this moment, as if the possibility of service could not be appreciated until this time. Isaiah is now willing to serve not out of obligation but out of gratitude and out of a desire to exalt God's glory. For God makes it plain that while spiritual experience is never merely a means to an end, neither is it an end in itself. Isaiah wants the world to know the greatness and the goodness of God. He's not concerned about promoting his school of prophets, or his system of financial management, or his course on public speaking. Isaiah is concerned with one thing . . . to honor the one who is most worthy of honor.

In response to his cleansing Isaiah submitted himself entirely to God's service! No matter how difficult his task would be, he said, ***"Here am I. Send me!"***

Today is Trinity Sunday. It is that one day in the Church year when our attention is focused most clearly on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity: that there is only one true God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit; three distinct Person in one Divine Being.

Whenever it comes to our profitably hearing God's Word, the writer of Hebrews tells us in chapter 3, verse 7: ***"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.' And in my anger, I swore: "They will not enter my rest" (Hebrews 3:7-11).***

"Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us enter it. So then, a Sabbath rest still remains for the people of God; for those who enter God's rest also cease from their labors as God did from his. Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

Indeed, the Word of God is living and active; sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow. It is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the hearts. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the One to whom we must render an account.

Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Hebrews 4:1, 9-16). Amen