

“Holy, Holy, Holy”

Isaiah 6

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

1 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. 2 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. 3 And one called to another and said:

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

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 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!”

6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah's Commission from the Lord

8 And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” Then I said, “Here I am! Send me.” 9 And he said, “Go, and say to this people:

*“Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.”*

*10 Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.”*

11 Then I said, “How long, O Lord?”

And he said:

“Until cities lie waste

*without inhabitant,
 and houses without people,
 and the land is a desolate waste,
¹² and the LORD removes people far away,
 and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.
¹³ And though a tenth remain in it,
 it will be burned again,
 like a terebinth or an oak,
 whose stump remains
 when it is felled.”
 The holy seed is its stump.*

- Isaiah 6, ESV

God is . . .

In the first sentence of his classic work *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer said, “*What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.*”

The two most important things for any human being to understand are who God is and who you are. Or, as John Calvin famously put it in the opening of *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*: “*Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other.*”

Now you may now immediately see the truth of this because, interestingly, although we’re always living our lives based on what we think about these two things, we’re often not consciously thinking about them. Often, we don’t think of these two things in explicit terms: ‘Who is God?’ and ‘Who am I?’ Instead, we might think –

- What is the meaning of life?
- Why am I here?
- Why is the world the way that it is?
- What will make my life better or make me happier?

And sometimes we might say these questions are too big and too hard to understand or answer adequately, but the truth remains that we are always living our lives based on what we think are probably the answers to these questions.

Here's another interesting truth: Our answers to these two basic questions influence each other. Who I think God is influences who and what I think I am, and also who or what I think I am influences who I think God is. But the influence runs more strongly in one direction or the other, and this is critical: I can be constantly reshaping God according to what I think and what I like, or I can be constantly rethinking who I am and what I'm really like in the light of what I know to be true about God. While there's always some mutual influence back-and-forth, one will be the dominating shaping influence on the other.

And the truth is that we should be constantly allowing who God has revealed Himself to be to shape us, but most people are constantly rethinking what they think about God based on their own ways of thinking. In the word of the French skeptical philosopher Voltaire: "In the beginning God created man in His own image, and man has been trying to repay the favor ever since."

This is a hugely important deal, because God is God, and we are not. He is the Creator and the Redeemer, and we are not. Now, you might be sitting there thinking, "Yeah, people really shouldn't do that. I'm sure glad I don't do that," but wait a minute. Are there certain attributes of God that you like more than others. Are you more drawn to God's goodness than to His justice? Do you like God's mercy more than His wrath? Or, to ask it a different way: Did you get to a certain point in listening to today's passage when you became uncomfortable, and maybe you didn't like what was being said as much as what came before?

One of the most important and most overlooked doctrines of God is the doctrine of divine simplicity. R.C. Sproul pointed this out in one of his teachings on this passage. When we say God is simple, we certainly don't mean that God is simplistic or easy to understand. In fact, God is incomprehensible, far above and beyond our ability to fully grasp. That's one of the reasons why we're uncomfortable with God as He is and are constantly re-shaping Him, trying to reduce and manage Him. No, when we say God is simple, we mean that He has no parts, that God is all of His attributes.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism begins its answer to Who is God? With "God is a spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable in His being." God's being – who God is - is absolutely perfect, unlimited by space or time and unaffected by change. This means you can't pick and choose attributes of God you like and don't like. God is who He is, or as He said to Moses, "I AM who I AM." He is all of His attributes, and His attributes cannot be

separated from each other. His love is a holy and just love. His justice is a wise and loving justice. His mercy is a just and powerful mercy. And so on.

So, what's the point? Well, if it is true that the two most important things for any human being to understand are who God is and who you are, then the single most important thing that can happen to any human being is to have a transformative encounter with the one true God, so that our conceptions of Him can be deeply changed and shaped by who He really is, and who He is can then define for us who we are. This is exactly what happened to Isaiah in today's passage.

I. The Holy LORD

We're told at the beginning of today's passage that Isaiah had this encounter with God in the year that King Uzziah died. This vision does seem to be Isaiah's calling to be a prophet, so that chapters 1-5 are likely an introduction to the book as a whole and not a set of prophecies he gave before his vision in Isaiah 6. Many people assume that Isaiah had this vision of the Lord after Uzziah's death, but verse 1 doesn't say that, just that it happened "in the year that King Uzziah died."

King Uzziah was the second-longest reigning monarch in the history of Judah, the Southern Kingdom of the divided Israel with its capital in Jerusalem. He reigned for 52 years, and was mostly a very good, successful, and godly king. Sadly, he grew proud and tried to offer incense in the Temple of the LORD, thinking that he should be both king and priest, something forbidden under the Mosaic Covenant. God disciplined him by striking him with leprosy and he lived the last years of his life confined inside his palace while his son, Jotham, conducted the public affairs of the kingdom.

In the year of his death, long before his death, it would've been known to those in the inner circles in Jerusalem that Uzziah was dying, Isaiah was in those inner circles, probably a member of a priestly family, which would explain why he was in the Temple. Uzziah had been a successful king who had mostly honored the Lord; he had reigned for as long as most people alive at the time could remember, and now he was dying. So, who would reign and what would that mean?

It was in this time of political and cultural uncertainty that Isaiah had his encounter with God:

1 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. 2 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. 3 And one called to another and said:

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

4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. – Isaiah 6:1-4, ESV

Now, if you look closely at this Bible passage, you’ll notice that “the Lord” in verse 1 looks different from “the LORD” in verse 3. The Lord in verse 1 is God’s title, the Sovereign, the Ruler, the Master, the Lord. The LORD in verse 3 is God’s covenant name, YaHWeH, specifically YaHWeH of hosts. So, at a time when people are wondering who is going to rule in Jerusalem, Isaiah sees this glorious vision of YaHWeH of the heavenly hosts sitting on a throne, high and lifted up. Who is going to rule? The One who has always been ruling, the true Sovereign over Jerusalem, Judah, and all heaven and earth.

So, the first thing Isaiah sees about God is that He is the Sovereign One who rules over His people in majesty and glory. God is high and lifted up and it is the train of His robe that fills the Temple. The Holy of holies, the inner sanctuary of the Temple, contained the Ark of the Covenant, with the mercy seat overspreading and the Ten Commandments inside. The Ark of the Covenant was regarded as the footstool of God, the place where God, who is enthroned in heaven, would meet with His people, when the High Priest would approach His feet, seen as resting on the Mercy Seat of the Ark. This was all symbolic but still very significant. As God says later in Isaiah 66:1, *“Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is the place of my rest?”*

So, the train of God’s royal robe or perhaps the hem of his royal garments – the word can mean either train or hem – filled the entire Temple, the inside of which was covered with pure gold. Then, up high stood the seraphim – the word means “the burning ones” – who are awesome in beauty and power, whose voices when they call out shake the very doorframe of the Temple. These magnificent creatures created by God to dwell in His presence have six wings, two given to them to cover their faces, two given to cover their feet, and then two to fly.

And one called to another and said:

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

In Revelation 4, we see these seraphim as four living creatures who never stop calling out day and night saying, “Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”

One of my pet peeves as a lover of the English language is the way in which the word “obsessed” has been dumbed down and overused in recent years. These days, if someone has anything more than just a passing interest in something, if they think something is cool or interesting or desirable, they’ll say, “Oh, I’m obsessed with that.” But “obsessed” really means to have one’s thoughts and feelings thoroughly dominated by a thought, idea, thing, or person. Someone who’s truly obsessed can hardly think about anything else.

The awesome angelic beings who dwell closest to God are obsessed with His holiness. It’s what they cry out about day and night: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord.”

The three-fold repetition of “holy” is widely understood to be a uniquely strong intensification. In Hebrew, repeating a word intensifies the meaning. Yet this is the only place where a word is tripled, and that could very well mean a really strong intensification. But it could also be a hint at the Triune Holiness of the Lord.

But what does it mean to be holy? Does it mean to be morally pure and upright, as in “She’s such a holy person” – meaning a really moral. Or “Why are you acting so “holier than thou”? – like an uptight goody two-shoes. The meaning of Holy isn’t primarily moral; righteousness more specifically describes the moral purity of God.

Holy is the core adjective describing God, His most central and unique attribute. It means set apart, in a category by Himself, utterly unique, and unstained or untainted by anything. It combines the ideas of God’s utter uniqueness and His radiant purity. Bible scholar D.A. Carson says “At its core, holiness is almost an adjective for God.” It conveys the very God-ness of God, and it thoroughly permeates and characterizes all of God’s other attributes. God is “The Holy One.”

God is the sovereign ruler over all, He is the Holy One – the One who is intensely, brilliantly, uniquely Holy – and He is YaHWeH of Hosts. YaHWeH is God’s covenant name, the name He chose to reveal Himself to His people. It means “I AM who I AM” or “The One who is and who was and is to come” It is a name that speaks of God’s self-sufficiency; only God has the power of being in Himself and truly makes Himself who He is. In many ways, the American ideal of “the self-made man” is an attempt to steal the glory of

God. It also speaks to God's unchanging nature – the same yesterday, today, and forever. God needs nothing from anyone in order to be who He is, and He never changes, so we can trust Him to never fail to keep His promises. And “of hosts” means He rules and commands the armies of heaven.

Then the seraphim say, “*The whole earth is full of His glory.*” I like the way Alec Motyer translates this line: “*That which fills the whole earth is His glory.*” He doesn't just rule over all; He fills all things with His glory, which is His weight and His splendor. What holds the universe together? Gravity? Really, it is God Himself and His glory. When John 1 speaks of Jesus and says that He is the light that gives light to everyone, he is conveying this same idea: It is the glory of God, shining through Jesus, who is the radiance of the glory of God (according to Hebrews 1) which gives light- truth, goodness, and righteousness – to all in the world. The universe is being constantly held together by God and to the extent that anyone anywhere has any truth, any goodness, or any righteousness, it comes from the glory of God through Christ Jesus.

This is who God is as He has revealed Himself:

The One who rules over all

The One who is continually praised by the most glorious creatures in the universe who hide their faces and their feet from the radiance of His presence as they obsessively proclaim His supreme holiness day and night.

He is The Holy One – utterly unique and radiant

He is the self-sufficient unchanging One who commands the armies of heaven

His glory – His weightiness and His radiance – fills the whole earth, holding all things together and giving light to all

Such intense revelation of the holiness, majesty, and glory of God causes the Temple itself to shake and to fill with smoke.

II. Holy Trauma & a Holy Cleansing

And so how does Isaiah respond to this encounter with the One True God? Is he excited? Is he laughing or shouting? No. He is deeply traumatized, shaken to the core:

⁵ 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!”

In chapter 5 last week, we read of the Prophet Isaiah pronouncing six woes on six woefully sinful groups of people in Israel – the greedy materialists, the self-indulgent hedonists, the willfully wicked, the moral relativists, those addicted to heavy drinking, and the politically corrupt. But when confronted by the Holy, Holy, Holy YaHWeH of Hosts, Isaiah pronounces a prophetic woe on himself. He is undone. He is utterly silenced in the face of such holy glory.

He is most aware of his unclean lips, and he knows they are unworthy to speak of the holy God to His people. He cannot do what God has called him to do with his unclean lips, lips that cannot be in God’s presence. But here, unclean lips stand for an unclean life. He cannot stand before God. He is utterly hopeless on his own. Knowing God more clearly, he now knows himself more clearly than ever before. He is not basically a good guy. He is not a holy man from a godly family of priests. He is unclean.

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.” – vv. 6-7

Imagine a coal so hot that a burning one can’t touch it. This is an intensely hot burning coal, and the seraphim touches Isaiah’s lips with it – his lips! And yet we don’t hear Isaiah cry out in pain. The cleansing this coal brought actually brought him relief from the deeper pain he was already experiencing before the intensity of God’s holiness.

Isaiah needed his guilt taken away and his sin atoned for. He needs removal of guilt and cleansing from the filth that sin has brought to his soul. God provides both. The coal was taken from the altar in the Temple, where sacrifices were made. Ultimately, the altar in the Temple could not provide the forgiveness and cleansing Isaiah needed. Only Jesus, who fulfilled the symbolism of the Temple altar on the cross, can truly remove our guilt and cleanse the stain of sin. And He does.

John tells us in John 12 that it was truly the glory of Jesus that Isaiah saw in the Temple. And that makes sense because Jesus is the radiance of the glory of God, and He is the atonement for the sin of God’s people.

So, if you want to know yourself, you have to know yourself in the light of who God is, and if you want to know God and be able to stand before Him, you need to be forgiven and cleansed by the sacrifice of Jesus on your behalf.

This is what you and I most need. We need to meet God in such a way that we know Him for who He is, not who our imaginations might wish Him to be. He is way, way better than we can ever imagine! We need to see ourselves in the light of His majestic, holy glory, so we can know how weak, frail, and unclean we are before Him. Then, we need to be forgiven, cleansed, and reconciled.

Most of us think we need something else – more money, a better job, a nicer house, a better car, a happier marriage, or something. But none of those things holds the universe together and none of them can forgive and cleanse us. We need the Lord.

Next week, we'll continue in Isaiah 6 and see how God calls and commissions Isaiah. We'll see that being called to serve and represent the Lord is both a hard and holy calling and the greatest privilege we can ever be given.