

God with Us: In the Temple

Isaiah 6:1-8

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If we haven't met, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is good to be with you. If you are a guest or a visitor, welcome. We're glad that you would join us this morning for worship. This is the third Sunday in the season of Advent, and Advent is a time, a season, when we celebrate the coming of Jesus, his arrival. That's what that word means: Advent. It simply means "coming" or "arrival," and that's what we look forward to, right? We oftentimes will read passages that point to Jesus' coming or verses that speak of his arrival, and the pinnacle of Advent is Jesus coming and dwelling amongst his people, taking on flesh, being born and living amongst us. And so, it's common for churches to go through Old Testament prophecies or the birth narratives and the Gospels, but this year what we're doing is we're looking at the various passages, a few different passages in the Old Testament as well as the New, where God is with his people. So, a few weeks ago, we started with God with his people in the garden, right, with Adam and Eve. And last week, we saw God with us on the mountain as he revealed himself to Moses. Next week, we'll see God in the manger with Jesus and the shepherds. And this week, we see God in the temple, God in the temple with us in Isaiah 6. So, if you have a Bible, you can turn to Isaiah chapter 6.

Isaiah is in the Old Testament. It's one of the prophets. It's basically about the middle of your Bible. So, if you open it right into the middle, you're probably going to be really close to Isaiah. It's also on page 571 in the Bibles in the chairs, if you want to find it there. But as a prophet, Isaiah was speaking, he was called to speak God's word to God's people. That's what Old Testament prophets often did. They would speak words of repentance, words of judgment, words of justice, words of truth, words of grace to the people of God. And that's what Isaiah does. In fact, in the first five chapters of Isaiah, he describes the spiritual failures and the wickedness and the unfaithfulness of God's people and the resulting judgment that will come upon them. That's the first five chapters. And that leads us into chapter 6, which is one of the most famous passages in the book of Isaiah. And that's because chapter 6 deals with the commissioning of Isaiah as the mouthpiece of God, as the prophet of the Lord. But before we get to his commissioning, his sending out, we see that Isaiah has this experience in the temple, this vision of a temple unlike any vision, any experience he had ever had before. So with that in mind, let's read Isaiah 6, beginning in verse 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. 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."

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." (ESV)

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and ask that as we come to it now, that you would allow us to see your holiness, your goodness, your grace. Allow us to behold your glory and lead us, Father, into your truth. Open our eyes, unplug our ears, soften our hearts, that we would behold you and love you. And we pray all this in Christ's name. Amen.

Well, a number of years ago, while my family and I were still living in St. Louis, I had lunch with a member of the church that I was a pastor of, and we met at the MAC West, the Missouri Athletic Club, West Campus. Now, the Missouri Athletic Club is exactly how it sounds. It's a place where there's restaurants, there's a workout room, there's tennis courts indoor and outdoor, a pool, those sorts of things. And I would eat with this man at this place on a semi-regular basis. He was a member, not me, okay? And he would invite me out to meet him for lunch here. It was near his office, near where our church was. And I knew exactly what to expect, right? It was going to be a decent sandwich, good drink, good conversation. We might overlook the indoor tennis court. So I knew exactly what to expect when I showed up.

On this one particular occasion, I walked in and I found my friend there before I was. He always beat me to the restaurant. But this time, his back was to me, which was a little odd because he always would sit facing the door. He didn't like to have his back to the door. I know some of y'all are like that. And, you know, who might be creeping up on you, right? No one, don't worry. But anyway, but he was turned around this time and his back was to me. And so I sat, you know, looking at the door and I didn't think anything of it. We started having our lunch. And then after a little while, I noticed something over his shoulder. And this is why he sat the way he did, because he knew this was going to come. You see, over his shoulder was a man who was being wheeled into the restaurant. He was in a wheelchair. And everyone knew who he was. They recognized him and they started to look at him and gaze at him. And he started to get a little closer to us. And he got wheeled to his table. And there he sat. And my friend said, "Do you know who that is?" I said, "Well, of course, I know who that is."

You see, sitting there at the table with his grandson, with the Presidential Medal of Freedom around his neck, was Stan Musial. Now, y'all don't know, many of you don't know, who Stan Musial is. And that's because you're not a baseball fan and you don't love the St. Louis Cardinals. But Stan Musial, also known as Stan the man, was one of the two greatest St. Louis Cardinals to ever play and probably one of the top 50 baseball players ever. In fact, in front of Bush Stadium, where the Cardinals play, there is a nearly 20-foot statue of Stan Musial. And written on the pedestal is, "Here stands baseball's greatest knight." He is baseball royalty, a St. Louis Cardinal legend. And there he was. I have a bobblehead of him in my office. If y'all want to come see it sometime. That's who he was. He's a legend, a royalty. That's who he was.

And there he was, sitting there. I have to tell you, I don't remember the rest of our conversation that I had with my friend. Now, granted, it's been over 10 years, but I'm pretty sure I didn't remember it the next day. I'm just glad he didn't confess some sin I needed to follow up with, right? But because I was simply in awe, and I was dumbstruck, and I was amazed, because there was royalty. This very ordinary, very normal lunch became very quickly abnormal and extraordinary. It was far more than I expected, far more than I could have ever dreamed of. It was extraordinary because royalty was in my presence. Baseball royalty, but royalty nonetheless. And something more extraordinary is happening to Isaiah.

Seeing the Lord

You see, Isaiah, he's a faithful Jewish man, and he knew the requirements of the law, and he knew what to expect if he were to go up to the temple. I mean, he had been there time after time, right? Countless times. He knew that he would experience prayer, and songs, and sacrifices, and offerings, and it was just on repeat. And he knew what he would see, and what he would hear, and the smells, right? These were all familiar to him. He knew what to expect at the temple, but in this moment, with this vision, he met something he never expected, something that he had never seen before. He came face to face with royalty, with the Lord, right? That's what we're told, "In the year that King Uzziah died." King Uzziah was one of the kings in Israel, around 740 BC. When he died, Isaiah went, and he was given this vision of the temple, and he says, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple." So this is royal language that's being employed, right? Sovereign language, that he's sitting on a throne. A throne is for kings and queens, but this throne is high and lifted up. It's an image of exaltation, so that anyone who would be in the vicinity of the temple would be able to see the one sitting upon the throne.

But it's not just the language of throne that points to his royalty, it's also the train of his robe. And as soon as I read "train of his robe", there was an image that came to my mind, an image that maybe some of you are familiar with, and it's the image of Princess Diana walking into St. Paul's Cathedral, right? Some of you probably watched it live on television. I was like 3, so I've only seen videos since then, but it's amazing, right? It's this amazing picture, because as she's walking down the aisle of St. Paul's Cathedral, there is a 25-foot train behind her. It's the longest train that a princess has ever worn for a royal wedding, right? And there she is walking very slowly, pulling it along, like her neck and her traps must have been jacked, right? Because that thing would be heavy and she's dragging it, and it is this picture of beauty, of glory. It points to her royalty, and yet the Lord's glory is even greater than that. Not a 20-foot, 25-foot train, but a train that fills the temple.

Everything is pointing to the fact that this is a king, but it's not just any king. He is THE king, right? Even the word that's used, "Lord," four times in these few verses. The word "Lord" translated here - two of them, you notice, are in small caps, so capital L, capital O-R-D, and those are in verses 3 and 5. And when we see it in small caps, y'all have heard me say this before, that is a translation of the Hebrew word "Yahweh." It is his divine name. But there are two other "Lords" in this passage, two other words, and this is translating not the word Yahweh, it's translating a different Hebrew word, "Adonai," which means "Lord" or "Master", "Sovereign" or "King." That's who this is. He is the king. And just to make sure that we see it for ourselves, that we know that what Isaiah is seeing is explicitly royalty, he says in verse 5. Now think about this. We were told that this happened in the year Uzziah, the king of Israel, who for, you know, the standards of Israel was a pretty good king, but it was in the year that Uzziah, the king of Israel, died. And now he's getting this vision of the true king.

Uzziah died, but this king, he reigns. This one that Isaiah beholds, he lives. He is not like Uzziah, and he's not like the kings of Israel that would come after him. He is the one who lives and sits on the throne in exaltation. His glory is immense, and he is to be worshiped by men and women.

Seeing the Angels

But not just men and women, he's worshiped even by the angels, because that's the second thing that Isaiah sees. He sees the angels. So we have these angelic beings, these seraphim, and they're flying around, right? And they have six wings, two for flying, two to cover their feet, and two to cover their faces. And there's a little bit of discussion about why they're covering their feet and why they're covering their faces. Some think that they're covering their feet because it's a symbol of humility to not expose their feet before the Lord. Others think that maybe they're covering their feet because it's a way of indicating that they will go where the Lord would have them, not where they would want to go. So they have to be instructed in the direction that they are to move. We don't know. We're not sure. I like the humility one personally a little bit better.

But then they're covering their faces, and why are they doing this? Well, some have speculated that maybe it's because they're not supposed to speak. They're covering their mouths and their eyes. They're not supposed to speak or see anything that the Lord won't encourage them to or call them to. Some others think that this has to do with the glory of the Lord. I mean, think about what we heard last week, right? When Moses, he wanted to see God in his unfiltered glory. And what did God say to him? He said, "you can't see my face, because if you see my face, you will die." That his glory is too great for men or women to take it in. And so some think that that's what's happening with the angels. Think about that. God's glory is so great that even angelic beings can't look into his face. His glory is on display. It's on display.

You see the angels, even though Isaiah's eyes are drawn to them, they are pointing to the Lord. They're pointing to the majesty of God. And it's not just through their presence that they do this, but it's what they say. You see it. They call to one another infinitely, back and forth, singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." And so I can imagine maybe one is on the one side of the throne, the other on the other. And one says, "Holy, holy, holy." And the other one replies, "Is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." And they're going back and forth, back and forth. "Holy, holy, holy." Now in Hebrew, repetition is a construction that helps to bring about emphasis. It's a common use for emphasis. And so we see this throughout Hebrew poetry and the Psalms and Proverbs, that there'll be this repetition of phrases or themes or words. But what's interesting here is that this is the only time in the Old Testament where we have a three-fold consecutive repetition. It's the only time. In fact, there's only one other time in the entire Bible, and that's in Revelation, when they're quoting from this text.

And so what we're to take from this is that this one who's being spoken of isn't just holy. He's not just "Holy, holy." He is "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." He is completely different. He is unique from everything else in the world. I mean, there are many things in the Bible that are called holy. God's mountain is holy. His temple is holy. The anointing oil is holy. The ground in which Moses stood before the burning bush, that was called holy. In the New Testament, the people of God were called holy, holy ones, saints. And yet, He is the only holy, holy, holy one. You know that phrase, "one in a million"? No, the Lord is one in

one, because He is the only one who inhabits that category. He is one in one. He is His own category, and He is the only one in it. And that's who the seraphim are worshiping. That's who the angels are pointing Isaiah towards.

Seeing One's Self

And when Isaiah sees not just the angels, but he sees the one that they're pointing towards, he sees something else. John Calvin once wrote that "true and sound wisdom consists in two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves." And that's what Isaiah sees. That's what he beholds. He sees not only the angels. He sees not only God, but he sees himself. In fact, in seeing God, he is made to see himself. We see it in verse 5: "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." To quote Calvin again, he said, "it is certain that man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself, unless he has first looked upon God's face, and then he descends from contemplating God to scrutinizing himself." You see, the clear knowledge that Isaiah gains is that he is in a heap of trouble. I mean, that is the theological category we were working in. He is in a great deal of trouble because he has beheld God. He says, "woe is me."

Now, what's interesting about this is that the first 5 chapters of Isaiah, Isaiah doesn't speak his own words. He's only speaking the words of the Lord to the people of God. This is the first time in the book of Isaiah that Isaiah speaks for himself. And what does he speak? He speaks catastrophe. Because when confronted by God's holiness, Isaiah sees his lack of holiness. It becomes evident, and it's not just his, but it's the people's: "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Now, have any of y'all wondered why lips? I have to tell you, when I started reading this passage earlier in the week to work through it, that was the first thing I wrote down. "Why lips?" Because I would have thought, when confronted by the holiness of God, I would have said, "woe is me, for I am lost. I am a man of unclean hands, because of what I've done." Or "unclean mind, because of my thoughts." But why lips? It seems odd, doesn't it? A little bizarre. So, you know, I started researching and looking into it, and I found that a lot of commentaries just don't even address it. It's not very helpful. But, you know, they don't. Maybe they didn't think about this question. But there are a few who do.

And so some think that maybe he talks about lips because the lips were basically the place where maybe he would have perceived his smallest sins. So it's a way of kind of saying, like, even my smallest sins bring woe upon me in front of God. Does that make sense? So that's one thought. Another thought is that lips has to do with the fact that he's being called to prophetic office, and he's recognizing that he doesn't have the ability to proclaim God's word, right? And so he's seeing his own inadequacy, his own failing. So maybe it has to do with that. There are a few other options. But I was talking to my friend Charles, who's also a pastor. He's preaching on this passage this morning in Birmingham. And we're a little bit ahead, so he can listen later. No, I'm just kidding. Sorry. Anyway.

But I was talking to Charles, and Charles had a great insight that he passed on to me. You see, he thinks, and I think he might be right, that Isaiah is embodying what Jesus would later speak of when Jesus talked about out of the mouth comes the heart. And though Isaiah hadn't heard those words of Jesus, I can't help but think that maybe that's what's happening, that Isaiah knows the depths of his heart because he knows his lips. He's heard his words. And so Isaiah says, "woe is me. I am a man of unclean lips," and I serve a people - I dwell in the

midst of a people - of unclean lips. You see, Isaiah recognizes that there's nowhere he can turn. He can't find a friend or a religious leader or a family member. He can't bring them to the temple and stand them before the Lord on his behalf. No, because every one of them are people of unclean lips. They too lack righteousness and holiness.

You see, what we are to take from this is that no one, not Isaiah, not Uzziah, not the king to follow Uzziah, not the religious leaders, not you, not me, can stand before the Holy One. That's what we see. When we stand before God, we behold his glory, but we also behold our lack of glory. Right? I mean, Isaiah, he doesn't say, he doesn't say, "Woe is me, but think of all the good things I did, God." He doesn't behold his glory and point to all his glorious works. I was talking to a friend recently who basically said that to me, "Penny, I'm just trying to do a lot of good things." And I said, "I think that's wonderful, but you will fail. And so have I. And so will I." Isaiah doesn't invoke his good works. No, he knows he is lost. He is terrified. And he should be, right? I mean, think about the scene. This would be terrifying. Six winged creatures flying around. Don't see that every day. The temple filled with smoke. The foundation shaking. The holiness of God realizing that you have fallen short. Terror and fear would come upon us, and it should. Because he knows what he deserves. God's judgment.

Now, what's interesting about this is that I expected the angels to calm his fears. Because that's what we see in other places in the Bible. So think about Luke chapter 1. There are two scenes in Luke one where an angel appears, one to Zechariah and one to Mary. And in both instances, Zechariah and Mary are rightfully scared. So what does the angel say? He says, "do not fear." Or think about Luke chapter 2, when the angel appears to the shepherds, and they again are rightfully terrified, what does the angel say? "Do not be afraid. Fear not." The angel calms these people in their terror, but here there is no calming. Did you notice that? Because his fear is appropriate. There is nothing that can be done. You see, what Isaiah needs isn't to have his fears calmed. What he needs is for his sins to be atoned for. And that's what he gets. Look at verses 6 and 7. "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."

In the Old Testament, the altar was the place where sacrifices were made, where blood was offered, where sin was atoned for. It was the place where cleansing and forgiveness and reconciliation was made. And Isaiah needed his sins to be atoned for. And so do we. Because like Isaiah, when we behold the Lord, our response should be, "Woe is me. I am lost." Like Isaiah, we need our sins atoned for. And like Isaiah, the Lord does. Not with flaming coals pressed to our lips, but through the blood of his son. The coal came from the place of sacrifice, the altar, the place of forgiveness that is made possible. And our forgiveness was made on the cross. That's where it comes from. Where Jesus went as the sacrifice, the final offering. And he took our sin upon himself. God's judgment came upon him. God's wrath came upon him rather than us. He was the sacrifice, sacrifice on the altar of the cross. And he was so, so that our sins would be atoned for. That is the grace of God.

Y'all, that is what we need. That is what we need. We need his grace and forgiveness and his atonement. And when that comes, it changes us. It transforms us. You see, looking at God and seeing our sin and knowing that we are forgiven, it changes us. It changed Isaiah. Look at verse 8. God said, "whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And Isaiah said, "Here I am. Send me." The one who trembled in fear and was humbled before the Holy One is transformed by God's grace so that he can now go and serve him. Now listen, we're, we too

are changed, we too are transformed, but we aren't called to be prophets. Not capital P prophets, right? That office is fulfilled in Jesus. That is not what we are called to be. And yet we are still called to be changed, to be transformed, to follow God wherever he would lead. And that's what God's grace does. It does change us. His atoning work for sin, it does transform us. It takes us, those who were once afraid in God's presence, we now find comfort in his presence.

Those who once standing before God would tremble in fear were now called in Hebrews to come with confidence, to draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace in our time of need. That throne that would have been a place of fear and trembling is now a place of comfort and peace, because God is atoned for our sin through his Son. So now we can approach the Father, not trembling, but humbly as sons and daughters, because that's who we are. We have been changed and transformed. Those who were once spiritually orphaned are now brought into the people of God, knowing that the Holy One, the Holy One has done what we could not do for ourselves. He is atoned for our sins, and he now dwells with us. Amen. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you have not left us in our sin, but that when we beheld it and saw it, that you showed us Christ, that you revealed to us what we need, and that is the work of Jesus. And so we claim his work on our behalf. We thank you that he went to the cross. He gave his life so that those who are not holy would be made holy, so that those who were not children would be brought into your family, so that those who were deserving of your judgment would be welcomed with your grace. And so we praise you and thank you for Christ, and we declare that you are the Holy One, the King, the Ruler over all who makes atonement for our sins. And we pray that in thanksgiving and all God's people said together, Amen.